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The Manor School

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Mrs. Elizabeth Thomas (Meade) Smith

BY

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AUTHOR OF "A BUNCH OF CHERRIES," "DADDY'S GIRL," "THE TIME OF ROSES," "BAD LITTLE HANNAH," ETC., ETC.

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THE MANOR SCHOOL

CHAPTER I

THE ATTIC OF DESIRE

CHRISTIAN MITFORD was thirteen years of age. She was a tall girl with a pale face, a little pronounced in expression, and quantities of thick, untidy, very bright fair hair, which had a habit of tumbling in a great mass over her eyes and round her shoulders. She was supposed to be much spoilt, and it was well known she had a will of her own.

Christian was an only child. Her home was in a big house in Russell Square. The house was large enough to have been the abode of princes in bygone days. It had enormous, lofty rooms, wide halls, great corridors, spacious landings, and, above all things, charming attics. The attics were not only very big and very roomy, but they were also not required for the use of the family at all. In consequence Christian took possession of them. She had adopted them for her own use when she was quite a little girl, not more than seven or eight years of age.

It was in the attics that Christian lived her real life. She made a fairy world for herself, and there she was happy. In the great front attic, which ran right across the house, she kept her dolls. Christian had twelve dolls, and they all had special characteristics and specially interesting histories. The adventures those dolls went through would have delighted any other little girl; Christian took these things as a matter of course. If Rosabel, the doll in the blue frock, would run away at night to live with the gypsies for a long time, she deserved punishment, and would be treated accordingly. If Abelard, who was dressed in the costume of an old crusader, would fight his enemies until he himself was all to pieces, and had to lie in bed without arms or legs, surely that also was his own fault, and his punishment served him right. Christian's cheeks used to blaze and her eyes grow bright as these adventurous dolls went through their career of naughtiness in her presence. She was so imaginative that she got herself to believe that they really did these things without any help from her, and sometimes she would sigh and shake her head and think herself much to be pitied for having such a fearfully troublesome, not to say dangerous family to manage.

But the dolls, with their dolls'-house for the respectable members of the family, and with their forests full of bandits, their crusades, their land of Palestine, their troubadours for the others, had had their day. Christian grew old enough to feel the glamour of the dolls depart. It was ridiculous to suppose that Abelard had really got that ghastly wound in his side, or that he had really lost his legs, fighting the Saracens. Yes, the dolls had had their day. But the fairy tales could be read and lived through, and she herself could be the heroine of adventure; and what a time she had when she was the voiceless Mermaid who loved a Prince and for his sake had her tongue cut out! Or how depressed she was when she acted the Ugly Duckling; and how she had, as the little Tin Soldier, adored the little Paper Princess!

But even the fairy-tale stage came to an end, and the history books had now their turn. Christian was William Tell, and her hand shook as she fired at the apple. Or she was Joan of Arc in prison, and putting on her armor when there was no one by to see. Or she was Charlotte Corday at the moment of her great inspiration. Or, again, she was on the way to the guillotine as that great hero of fiction, Sidney Carton.

The world knew nothing about Christian. They saw a dull little girl who flitted through life demurely and never expressed any strong feelings about anything.

"She is a child without character," her French governess said of Christian.

"She is a good girl, but she will never play—at least, except in the ordinary way," her music-master said.

"If she had only a little imagination she would do so much better over her poetry and history," her English mistress declared.

It was only her dancing-mistress who now and then expressed approval as Christian flitted about on her small feet, curvetting and curtsying, bending and bowing, and doing all these things with an inborn grace.

"Ah, that child!" said this discerning person; "has she not the very essence of poetry—the thing itself?"

But Christian did not even hear her dancing-mistress praise her. She was accustomed to being found fault with: even her mother only bestowed faint praise upon her; and as to her father, he scarcely noticed her at all.

Never mind, her real home was in the front attic. The grown people of the house had very little idea how much of Christian's time was spent in this attic. But however cold the weather, Christian never felt it up there. She would remain in the huge, desolate place hour after hour, crouching in a corner, her eyes gazing fascinated at the scene which she had conjured up. Of course, she got many a cold in this way. The colds were nursed and she was well treated, and no one ever for a moment traced them to their true cause.

There came an afternoon soon after Christmas, cold and dreary, when icy blasts of wind banged up against the dormer-windows of Christian's attic, and such piles of snow were heaped up on the roofs hard by that the young girl could only picture herself as the Ice Maiden. At last the cold became unbearable, and she stepped out of fairyland and ran swiftly downstairs.

On the floor just below the attics were the nurseries and her schoolroom. In the front nursery sat old nurse. She was mending some of Christian's stockings. She had spectacles on her nose, and was singing softly to herself. Christian loved her perhaps better than anyone else in the world, but she did not wait to speak to her now. She hurried past the nurseries; their day was over. She used to sigh when she remembered how many days were over. The dolls' day, the fairy-tales day, and of course the nursery day. But, thank goodness, the hero and heroine day would never be over!

"When I am grown up," thought the child, "I shall be a real one. I mean to do something very big, very great, very grand. I am preparing—I know I am preparing—all this time."

Christian also hurried past the schoolroom, which was quite comfortable and snugly furnished, with big fires in the grates. She passed the next floor, and presently found herself on the one where the drawing rooms were situated. Here, beyond the two great drawing rooms, was a small and very comfortable boudoir. The door of the room was slightly open, and Christian observed that heavy curtains were drawn across the windows. The logs on the fire blazed up merrily and a grateful breath of heat came out to the child. Christian went in at once and stood by the fire. She had just begun to thaw when she heard footsteps approaching. Now, if she made for the door she would certainly meet the intruder. This was not to be borne. She flew across the room, pushed aside the heavy curtains which sheltered one of the windows, and curling herself up on the window ledge, was completely lost to view. There were double windows and shutters, and the shutters were fastened. There was, therefore, not the slightest draught, and the window ledge itself was soft with cushions, and had a down pillow at one end. Christian had often lain there before to sleep. The little nook was warm and, compared with the attic, most comfortable. She cuddled herself up amongst the cushions and lay quiet. Of course, she would not stay long; she would just get warm, and then go upstairs to her lessons.

But the footsteps she had heard did not enter the room, and presently drowsiness stole over her and she fell asleep. When she awoke it was to the sound of voices. She raised herself very carefully, taking care not to make the slightest noise, and, dividing the curtains about a quarter of an inch, peeped out. Her mother, Mrs. Mitford, was sitting near the fire with her back to Christian. She was a pretty little woman, very young-looking for her age, and dressed in the height of fashion. A tempting looking tea equipage stood on a small table near, and as Christian watched, her mother raised a small silver teapot and poured out a cup of tea. She handed it across to a lady whom Christian knew well and hated violently. She was a certain Miss Neil, who often visited her mother. Christian had long ago pronounced Miss Neil a frumpy, tiresome, cross old woman.

"I do dislike her!" she said now to herself. "I wonder my darling mumsy can stand her."

As the child watched she saw Miss Neil help herself to a piece of buttered toast, and at the same time her mother said:

"Whatever happens, I shall give her a first-rate outfit; I have made up my mind to that."

Christian's heart made a great bound. She dropped back into the shadow, making a slight creaking noise as she did so. Mrs. Mitford glanced round her nervously.

"Don't you hear someone in the room, Julia?"

"No, dear; only mice in the wainscot," was Miss Neil's reply. "But, as you were saying, you will send Christian provided with a good outfit. That is so like you; you always were such a thoughtful, excellent mother."

Mrs. Mitford liked to be praised, and Miss Neil was aware of that fact. Mrs. Mitford's placid face shone with satisfaction.

"I should be sorry," she said, "if I failed in my motherly duties. The mother of one child has a great responsibility thrust upon her."

"Your poor little girl won't like the change—eh?" said Miss Neil.

"I'm afraid not," replied Mrs. Mitford, with a shrug of her dainty shoulders. "The school her father has selected for her is, I understand, very severe in tone. Discipline is much exercised there; but my dear husband insists. He says that we are spoiling Christian."

Christian, at the other side of the curtains, dug her nails into her flesh. It was with the utmost difficulty that she could keep from screaming aloud.

"I want you to help me, Julia," continued Mrs. Mitford. "We'll have the carriage out immediately after breakfast to-morrow and go round to the different shops. We really have no time to lose. I mean to give her two good, serviceable school frocks, two best frocks for Sunday—one is all that is necessary, but I want her to look really nice—an everyday evening frock, and a full-dress party one. Then she must have a tailor-made coat and skirt, and about half a dozen blouses."

"An abundance," said Miss Neil. "Too much, I should say. I never think there is any use in pampering young girls."

"Don't you, you old skinflint?" thought Christian at the other side of the curtain.

"Of course, there are a thousand and one other things," continued Mrs. Mitford; "but everything must be got in a great hurry, for she goes next week."

"Next week," thought Christian. "Oh!"

Her thoughts flew to the attic. In the attic she was Charlotte Corday: she had arrived at Paris; the greatest moment of her life was at hand. In the boudoir she was a little girl eavesdropping. Yes, it was an ugly position. She wriggled, then remained quiet, for the most awful thing of all would be to be found out.

"What day did you say the dear child was to go to her school?" asked Miss Neil.

"Next Tuesday. This is Wednesday—not a week off now."

"By the way, Mary," said Miss Neil suddenly, "have you told the child?"

"I have not Julia; and, what is more, I do not intend to. I shan't say anything whatever about it until the night before. What is the use in making her miserable? When she hears she will have no time to be sorry; she will be far too surprised; and when she gets to school her new and pleasant life will absorb her altogether. I want you to take her, by the way, Julia, for neither her father nor I can spare the time."

"When do you start yourselves?"

"Early on Tuesday morning. It is all so sudden. Of course, my dear husband is greatly pleased, for a great honor has been conferred on him. But for this we should not have sent Christian from home."

Miss Neil slowly and deliberately stirred her tea, and by-and-by she put down the empty cup and saucer.

Christian again raised herself and peeped through the curtain. She watched her mother's straight little profile—the pretty lips, the resolute chin, the low forehead, the pretty brown eyes.

"And yet she is hard," thought the child. "She speaks as though she did not care. I always thought mumsy pretty, but somehow I don't think her pretty to-night. She is hard; yes, that's it—hard."

Miss Neil began to draw on her gloves.

"I will call at eleven o'clock to-morrow," she said. "And rest assured, Mary, I shall help you by every means in my power."

"Thank you, dear; I am sure you will. Good-by for the present. Please make a list to-night of what you think will be required for a child whose parents will be in Persia for four or five years. Of course, she must have fresh things from time to time, but I want her to take all that is necessary for her."

"I will indeed; I will with pleasure do what I can for your little Christian. Good-by for the present."

Just as Miss Neil was leaving the room, and before Christian had fully made up her mind whether she would dart from her shelter and confront her mother with the fact that she had heard all, Mrs. Mitford took out her watch, uttered a shriek, and cried:

"Why, I ought to be at the War Office now to meet Henry!" and she rushed from the room.

Christian crouched back amongst her pillows. She stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth to prevent her sobs from being heard. What did it all mean? She could not understand.

CHAPTER II

THE MYSTERY

Mrs. Mitford did not return, and presently Christian slipped from her hiding-place and ran upstairs. Never having had companions, she had not that absolute desire to confide in someone which is the primary thought of most young girls. She went into her room, washed her face, brushed out her hair, and then entered the nursery.

Nurse was seated by the fire, busy over her endless mending and turning. Nurse, of course, knew; her eyes were red, as though she had been crying a great deal.

"Why, Miss Christie, darling," she said to the young girl, "wherever have you been? You look pinched and cold."

"I haven't had my tea; I expect I look hungry," said Christian, speaking slowly.

"What a shame!" cried nurse. "Did they forget to give it to you?"

"They didn't," said Christian. "I saw it in the schoolroom just now as I passed the open door, but it looked cold and untempting; I'd rather have none than that sort of tea."

"I'll make you some in a minute," said nurse.

"Oh, will you, nursey?"

Christian felt so cheered that her great trouble of next week seemed to recede in the distance.

"And may I toast the bread and put on the butter?"

"To be sure, darling! I keep my own tea and bread and butter in this cupboard; and here is fresh milk. And you shall have a new-laid egg."

"Oh, I should love it!" said Christian. "Do give me a thick slice of bread at once, nursey, and let me toast it."

The next few minutes passed happily, and soon Christian was munching buttered toast, eating her egg, and drinking hot tea. It is wonderful what a good fire, a sympathizing old nurse who is not too curious, and sweet tea and buttered toast will accomplish. Christian had been thinking herself the most miserable, cruelly used, neglected girl in the world; but now once again the sunny side of life appeared.

Nurse resumed her work. She was mending a little brown skirt, adding to it and putting fresh braid round the bottom.

"Is that my old skirt? I thought I had done with it," said Christian.

"It will be as good as new when I have finished my work over it," replied nurse. Her tone was guarded.

"She knows, of course," thought the child, "but she is not going to tell. Well, neither will I tell. I will just pretend during all the horrid days that are coming that I don't know anything. I feel waking up within me my very naughtiest self. I know I shall be terribly naughty between now and that black day when spiteful old Neil and I start off for that good-discipline school together. Perhaps—who can tell——"

Christian's eyes brightened; a roguish gleam came into their dark depths. She looked full up at nurse, then lowered her eyelashes.

"Nursey," she said, "do put down that horrid skirt and play bezique with me."

"I can't, my darling; I haven't the time."

"Of course you've got time. I don't want that horrid skirt; I hate it. I have plenty of skirts."

"But your mother said it was to be got ready for you, miss. She and Miss Neil came up here to-day and overhauled some of your things, and they said this skirt would stand a lot of wear—at the seaside, for instance."

"But I am not going to the sea. I couldn't wear a hot thing like that in the summer. What do you mean?"

Nurse looked frightened. "There!" she said, irresolution coming all over her old face; "I will please the child. Get the cards, darling; we'll enjoy ourselves."

Christian laughed. They sat by a round table and set to work. They were in the midst of their game when Miss Thompson, Christian's resident governess, entered.

"Whatever are you doing, nurse?" she said. "You know we have all to work as hard as ever we can. There won't be half enough time to make preparations."

"Why, what is all this mystery?" cried Christian. "Preparations for what?"

"Nothing, dear—nothing."

"There's no such thing as nothing," replied Christian, laughing.

Miss Thompson got quite red. "Young girls don't always know what they are talking about," she said in a severe tone. "Nurse has got to work, and I have got to work, and you have got to be good. By the way, where do you keep your story-books?"

"Upstairs, downstairs, and in my lady's chamber," answered Christian.

"Well, wherever you keep them, I want them collected."

"What for?"

"I wish to make a list of them."

"I can't fly over the house for them to-night. I'll get them to-morrow morning if I must get them."

"Well, come into the schoolroom now. There are several things we must arrange."

"I will after I have finished my game," said Christian.

Miss Thompson thought it better to retire than to make a fuss, and Christian and nurse proceeded with their game.

"Why ever do you sigh so, nursey?" asked Christian.

"I didn't know I was sighing, lovey."

"You didn't know that you were hiding a big mystery. You are a silly old woman. Thompson lets out things, and you let out things, and if I want to poke my finger into the secret I could; but I don't care—not a bit. I'm off now to have a chat with Thompson."

Before Christian could carry these words into effect there came a knock at the door. It was burst open, and a rosy-faced, black-eyed little girl of the name of Rose Latimer entered. She was nurse's grand-niece, and was supposed not to be a fit companion for Christian. Nevertheless Christian adored her. She found her far more interesting and more companionable and more get-at-able than any of the girls whom she met or who were invited to play with her.

Rose's bright eyes danced when she saw Christian. Christian ran up to her and kissed her hurriedly.

"Come!" said nurse; "that aint proper. Rose, you mind your manners. You aint on the same standing as my young lady, and you should remember it."

"But indeed she is," said Christian—"that is, if being pretty and ladylike and funny and affectionte makes her on the same standing. Some of the girls I know are perfect horrors; but Rosy—why, she is just Rosy. Sit down, Rosy, dear. Here's a lot of toast left; and nurse shall boil you another egg. But do you know that I am Charlotte Corday to-day? Marat is getting into his bath, and I shall go and kill him in a minute or two. Isn't it thrilling?"

"Ah!" cried nurse, who knew nothing either about Marat or Charlotte Corday; "what a perfectly awful thing to say, Miss Christian! You fair terrify me."

Christian made no answer. She raised her brows and looked with her intelligent, keen, overstrung little face at Rose.

"Will you spend the night?" she said suddenly. "I want to talk to you. Nurse, will you keep Rosy until the morning?"

"Miss Christian!"

"You can if you like, nursey. She shall sleep with me. She shall; she must."

"Miss, I couldn't hear of it."

"Very well, never mind about that. Just ask her to stay. She shall sleep in your bed, and I will have a chat with her by-and-by. You wouldn't like, nursey——"

"What, Miss Christian?"

"Suppose I wasn't to be with you always—I mean you wouldn't like to feel you had refused one of my last wishes. If you come to think of it, it is almost like a a dying wish; isn't it, nursey?"

"Oh, dear!" cried the poor nurse, "the child does wring my heart. Rose, run along, then. Go and take off your hat and coat, and come and help me to put the braid on this skirt."

During the rest of that evening Christian enjoyed herself. It was really great fun being at the back of the secret. To have a secret going on that she was not aware of would have been irritating, almost maddening; but to know it all the time, and so lead up to it and get people who imagined that they were keeping it so safe and secure to all but betray themselves, was quite interesting. Christian sat down very demurely in the schoolroom, and allowed Miss Thompson to reveal herself as much as she could desire. Miss Thompson imagined she was keeping the secret of Christian's school to herself, but Christian knew better.

At last it was time to go to bed. She bade Miss Thompson good-night and peeped into the nursery. Nurse had gone to her room, but Rose was sitting by the fire. Christian tiptoed across the room.

"When are you going to bed, Rosy?"

"Nurse said I was just to sit up to say good-night to you; then I must go, for I can't keep my eyes open."

"You will have to presently. But be off now; get into bed with nurse, and after a little, when she is asleep, slip out and come into mine. You know where my bedroom is."

"To be sure, miss."

"You did it before, you know, Rose."

"Yes, Miss Christian."

Rose was standing up within a foot or two of Christian, and her eyes were shining brightly.

"You will do it again," said Christian. "Nobody found out before, and nobody 'll find out now. I want you to give me just the most tremendous help, and only you can do it. I shall leave my door ajar. I'll be in bed in half an hour. You slip into bed beside nurse, and when she is sound asleep, get out again and come to me. Then we'll talk; then you'll find out what I really want. Oh, Rose! it is greater than William Tell and the apple. It is nearly, but not quite, as big as Joan of Arc. It is big and monstrous, and only you, Rose, can help me."

CHAPTER III

A WILD SCHEME

THREE-QUARTERS of an hour later Rose was cuddled up in Christian's bed. When the two heads were almost touching, and the brown cheek and the pale one were pressed close together, and two little hands were clasped tightly under the bedclothes, then Christian began to unburden her mind. The door was shut; the house was quiet—that is, the nursery part of the house; Miss Thompson, the governess, had a headache, and would certainly not appear on the scene again until morning; nurse was noted for her deep and long sleep; the servants were far away. If father and mother came in long past midnight, they would not trouble Christian in her distant bedroom; she was safe. She felt that she was quite safe; but the feeling that if she were discovered she would most certainly be punished added to the fascination of the moment.

"Rose," she said, "I must not speak loud, but I have something most important to tell you. What do you think is going to happen?"

"Well, Miss Christian," replied Rose, "the whole house seems to be, so to speak, on a twitter. There's my great-aunt; she don't seem to know whether she's on her head or her heels. There's something up, but I don't know what it is."

"You'll know in a minute or two; I'll tell you. Now listen; only remember, first, it is a most tremendous secret between you and me."

"Yes, yes," said Rose; "I love secrets." She pressed a little closer to Christian.

"You are quite my very greatest friend, you know, Rosy," said Christian. "There's Belle Webster and Bertha Hole; they think themselves quite chummy with me, but you are my real friend. We understand each other, we have had so many thrills together."

"Oh, yes," said Rose, "yes! Only I don't like you when you are Charlotte Corday. I was Marat once, you know, and I didn't like that time."

"Well, I'm not Charlotte now. Perhaps I'll never be again. But listen. The secret is our secret. It is too funny, Rosy. The rest of the house think that it is theirs, but it is ours all the time. Now then! I was so cold up in my attic—my darling fairy attic—this afternoon that I ran down to get warm in mother's boudoir. I hid myself behind the curtains. It was so cozy that I dropped asleep. I was lying on the window ledge, and there were cushions, and a soft pillow, and everything to make it delicious. When I woke I heard mother talking to that horrid Neil woman."

"I know her," said Rose. "She snubbed me once awfully; she said I had no call to be coming here so often."

"Well, she has no more right in the house than you have," replied Christian. "But now you will be astonished."

She proceeded to relate the entire story—all that her mother had said, and all that Miss Neil had said; and having given the outlines, she further impressed the fact on Rose that she, Christian, was to be sent to school next week. She was to be sent to school, as it were, in the dark, and she was not to be told anything about it until the night before she went.

"They want to keep it dark until the very last minute," she said. "It is fun, isn't it, Rose?"

"Fun," said Rose—"fun!"

Her voice quivered. It quivered so much that it suddenly ended in a choking sob.

"Why Rosy," cried Christian, immensely touched, "you are not crying just because I must go?"

"Miss, I can't bear it," said Rose. "There's no one else ever took a mite of notice of me. I can't help thinking of myself altogether, miss; I can't truly. There's mother; she makes me sit at the dressmaking till I'm fit to faint, and I have no fun—never! I'm like you, miss; I can't make friends outside. I have one friend, and she seems to fill all my heart, and you are she; and if we are to be parted, Miss—— Oh, Miss Christian! I can't—I can't bear it."

Christian, notwithstanding her bravery, found herself crying also. She put her arms around Rose, buried her head in her neck, and sobbed.

"It is awful," she said after a pause. "I did not think so much of parting from you, Rosy, but it is quite terrible; for it isn't even as if I were going to an ordinary school, and coming back for the holidays; but I am going to a severe-discipline one, and I am not coming back—I am to spend the holidays and all there. I might as well be dead, mightn't I, Rose?"

"It's worse nor if you were dead."

"Oh, Rose, it couldn't be worse!"

"It is," said Rose, "for if you were dead I could go on Sundays and take flowers to your grave; I could—I could. Oh, it is much worse! I would save up and buy 'em; no one should hinder me. It is much worse nor if you were dead."

The pathetic picture so conjured up of Rose bending over her grave and putting flowers there was so affecting that Christian sobbed again. After a time, however, she ceased crying.

"We must do something," she said; "we are both young, and we have both got a lot of spirit."

"Oh, haven't I?" said Rose. "There's nothing daunts me when I'm put to it. Mother says I'm the very naughtiest little girl she ever come across. She threatens perhaps I'll get ugly, just because I'm so desperate naughty. She says that sometimes when you are so mad with spirits, and so desperately fond of yourself, you fall ill with smallpox and that sort of thing. I don't believe it, of course, but she does hold it over me. She seems as sure that I'll take smallpox as that I'll have a cold. It's queer, isn't it?"

"It's silly, I call it," said Christian. "Now then, Rose, don't let's talk any more about that. If you have got spirit, so have I. Suppose, now, that I don't go to that school."

"How will you manage that?" said Rose

"Did you ever hear of a girl running away?" asked Christian. "That's the thought that has come to me. I thought that if you and I were together we could run away. We could support ourselves, I suppose."

"Not without money," said the practical Rose. "It's a lovely thought—the most daring and truly delicious thought I ever heard of—but it wants money."

"I've got seven pounds," said Christian. "Ever since I was a little, tiny girl my godmother has sent me a pound on my birthday, and I haven't spent any of the money. How far would seven pounds go?"

"Oh! a long way; it's a heap of money," said Rose. "Why, it's one hundred and forty shillings. That's an awful lot."

"Yes, I thought it was," said Christian. "I remembered the money the very moment mother talked about not letting me know until the night before. I shall listen, of course, when she does speak, and I will pretend to be good and submit. Perhaps she will be so sorry for me that she will give me some more pocket money. I hope she will. But what I really mean to do is to slip away somewhere with you, Rosy—to go to some place with you where we can live together. Have you got any money of your own?"

"A shilling," replied Rose sadly. "I took a long time to save it up. Had you died, Miss Christian, I would have spent it on flowers for your grave; so now I will spend it in running away with you—that I will."

"You can't do more, Rosy," said Christian. "Well, we must make our plans, and we must not tell one single human being. We have got to consider how we can live in the very cheapest way, for one hundred and forty shillings will not go far. I suppose they will send the police after us. Isn't it splendid, Rosy? Can you really believe that two young ordinary girls are going to do such a desperate thing?"

"You aint an ordinary girl, Miss Christian."

"Well, perhaps I am not."

"You always was cut out for the part of heroine," continued Rose; "anyone could see that with half an eye. Why, haven't you been William Tell and Joan of Arc and Charlotte Corday for ever so long? And afore that you were fairy queens and fairy princesses, and witches, and such-like. You're cut for the part, miss, and now the time has come."

"It has," said Christian, whose heart was beating fast. "We must think out most of our plans before we go to sleep."

The two girls did think. They were both far too excited to feel sleepy. Their voices kept on murmuring in an even, monotonous sound, which could scarcely penetrate through the closed door of Christian's bedroom.

After a fashion they made their plans. What Christian had only wildly dreamt of became definite and something that could be done. Seven pounds was seven pounds, and judiciously spent—spent, too, by a girl of the Rosy sort, a girl who knew poverty and how to live very small and very cheap—it would certainly go a long way.

Strange to say, Christian's conscience did not trouble her. She had been thoroughly well brought up, but her heart was sore now. Her mother had spoken almost coldly about parting with her one lonely girl. She, Christian, was to be sent to an awful strict-discipline school, where she had to stay for years and years, away from all those she loved in the world. She would take her life into her own hands; she would do a desperate, wicked thing, and she would not let her conscience prick her.

"We will do it," she said over and over again to Rosy. "You, Rosy, must find out where it is best for us to go, and then you must come and tell me everything."

"I will," replied Rosy. "I know a girl called Judith, and I think she will help us. Once she spent a whole winter in a gypsy's caravan. She did enjoy herself. She had a fine time, and she had to spend nothing at all. But they had to dye her with walnut juice; maybe you wouldn't like that, Miss Christian."

"No, I shouldn't like that at all," said Christian, who rather prided herself on her fair but somewhat pale complexion. "But that needn't happen, need it?"

"Oh, no; but it happened to Judith. She was dyed with walnut-juice, and she wore gypsy's clothes."

"I shouldn't mind that part," said Christian.

"She had a great taste for music," continued Rosy, "and she played a tambourine and danced. They got her up as a sort of Italian gypsy girl, and she danced wonderful pretty in the streets. She didn't seem ever to want for money after that; she got so many pennies.

You can dance, can't you, Miss Christian? You've had lots of lessons."

"Dance!" said Christian, a sort of thrill running down to her feet and making them move up and down even though she was in bed. "I should just think I can dance. There's nothing in the world I love better. Oh, Rosy, if we could make our living by dancing it would be too scrumptious!"

"Well, I'll find out everything to-morrow and let you know," said Rosy. "I mustn't come here, for my great-aunt would be angry; but I'll come the day after, and I'll bring all the news with me. Let's think. To-morrow will be Thursday; you aint to go afore Tuesday next week. There's lots of time, only the more money you can get the better it will be. I'll come here on Friday night at the latest."

"Well, then, perhaps we had better go to sleep now," said Christian, who was tired at last. The very novelty of the thing made her tired.

She dropped off into a heavy slumber, dreaming all through the night of wonderful things: of gypsies and their caravans; of Italian girls with tambourines, and little sequins round their heads. She fancied herself an Italian girl in a red frock. She though how pretty she would look, and how sweet it would be to dance. She would let her abundance of hair fall over her neck and shoulders. A fair Italian girl would be even more captivating than a dark one; and Rosy—pretty Rosy—could be the dark one. Oh, they would have a good time! They would enjoy themselves. And it couldn't be wrong; for if father and mother chose to go to Persia and not show any grief at parting from Christian, why should not Christian take her life in her own hands?

She awoke in the morning and found that Rosy's place was vacant, that astute little girl having left the side of her dearest friend and gone back to nurse. For it would never do for nurse to guess that the young girls were, as she would express it, hatching mischief. Nurse was somewhat suspicious as far as her grandniece was concerned. She knew Rose's character. She had often condoled with her mother on having such a naughty child. Of course, Rosy was very pretty, and she was very fond of Miss Christian; and—worse luck—Miss Christian was very fond of her; and there never was a more masterful child than dear young Miss Christian. Yes, even if Rosy was nurse's own relation, she did not want Christian to see too much of her. But this week of all weeks the child she loved should not be crossed; she should have every single thing she wished for—yes, every single thing; nurse herself would see to that. Nurse considered that Miss Christian was treated shamefully: bundled off to school just as though she were a baby; parted from the nurse who loved her as if she were her own child; taken from the old home and from that strange, mysterious attic where she had spent so much of her time; torn from everyone and taken to school—to a school a long, long way off. Nurse felt piteous tears very near her eyes.

Mr. and Mrs. Mitford had decided to board nurse out during their absence in Persia. The other servants were to be dismissed. Miss Thompson, with an excellent reference and six months' salary over and above what was owing her, would seek another situation. The house would be let to strangers. Christian in reality would have no home.

But when she woke the next morning, and faced the fact that her home in Russell Square would not be hers much longer, Christian did not feel low-spirited, for she and Rosy would certainly carry out their plan in all its details. She was in high spirits, therefore, at breakfast, and enjoyed getting Miss Thompson, as she expressed it, to give herself away. Miss Thompson found it almost impossible to keep her secret with Christian looking at her, and questioning her, and pretending to observe nothing, and yet showing in her eyes that she knew all.

Miss Thompson went down soon after breakfast to have an interview with Mrs. Mitford.

"Somehow," she said—"although I don't like to say it—somehow I think the child has an inkling of what is going on. Would it not be better to tell her? She would be more prepared, and would not feel it so much at the time."

"If she has an inkling she is bearing it very well," said Mrs. Mitford. "My dear," she added, turning to her husband, who came into the room at that moment, "Miss Thompson is talking about our dear Christian. She says that the child seems to guess that something is happening."

"I am sure she guesses," said Miss Thompson, blushing and trembling a little at her own audacity. "She looks at me with such very questioning eyes, and tries to lead me on, as it were, to betray myself."

Mr. Mitford laughed. "Just like Chris," he said. "She always was a bit of an oddity. But, my dear," he added, turning to his wife, "we will not tell her, all the same. I couldn't stand the thought of the child crying and moaning for the last few days. She may guess—although I don't think she can really—but she is not to be told. Understand, Miss Thompson, the child is not on any account to be told."

"Now listen," said Mrs. Mitford as Miss Thompson was leaving the room; "you needn't keep her to her lessons. You may take her to the Zoo or to Maskelyne and Cook's this morning—anywhere just to give her a bit of fun. Keep her out as much as you can."

"But she will be so surprised; she knows that you are so particular about her lessons."

"Well, tell her that I think she is looking rather pale, and that she may have a holiday. Use some tact, Miss Thompson; you can manage it if you like."

Miss Thompson left the room and returned to the schoolroom. Christian was busily engaged pulling out her favorite books from their places in the bookcase and examining them. She knew that she and Rosy could only take one or two books away with them, and she was undecided whether to select her new and beautiful edition of the Arabian Nights or a battered old Shakespeare. She was extremely fond of Shakespeare, but on the whole she felt inclined to take the Arabian Nights.

"They will suit Rosy," she said to herself. "I don't believe Rosy has read any of them—or at least hardly any; and Rosy is too young and too ignorant for Shakespeare. Yes, I think I will select——"

"What in the world are you doing, Christian?" said Miss Thompson as she entered the room.

"Pulling my books about."

"Then put them all back on the shelf at once, dear."

"I was only wondering," said Christian. "There's more reading in the Arabian Nights, I think it will do. Do you mind my putting a little bit of blue ribbon in my copy of the Arabian Nights, Miss Thompson?"

"But why, dear—why?"

"I shall recognize it then at once. Now I suppose we have got to do horrid lessons."

"It's a very strange thing to me, Christian, that such an intelligent girl as you should dislike lessons. I should have imagined that you would love your history and your literature."

"I like Spanish history best," said Christian; "it is the most bloodthirsty."

"My dear, that is a horrid thing to say."

"Well, it's true," answered Christian. "It's much less dull than English history—English history, I mean, as it's written. I wish I could make stories out of it. Wouldn't you all gape and scream and jump about, and feel that you must fight like anything, if you listened to my stories? Think of 'John of Gaunt'; and think of the 'Black Prince'; and oh! think of 'Agincourt' and the 'Field of the Cloth of Gold.' Oh, dear! oh, dear! couldn't I make the whole thing shine? And wouldn't I just? But English history as it is written is very, very dull."

"I don't agree with you. When you are older you will know that English history written by such men as Macaulay and Froude is most beautiful and thrilling. Now I have news for you."

"You do look strange!" said Christian; "what can be the matter?"

"I have just been down to see your mother."

"Oh, can I see her?" said Christian, a swift change passing over her face. "Can I? May I? I want so badly to ask her a question."

"She is going out; she does not wish to be disturbed."

"Oh, I know all about that."

"You know about it?"

"Yes; but never mind. Tell me what your secret is, Miss Thompson; I can see it is bubbling all over your face."

"Your mother says that you are looking pale, and that you may have a holiday."

Christian smiled. Her smile came gradually: at first it was just a little dimple in her left cheek; then it spread to her lips; then it filled her eyes; then a wave of color mounted to her face, and she burst into a hearty fit of laughter. But when she ceased laughing there were tears in her eyes.

"My dear," said her governess, "are you well?"

"Yes, I am quite well. So I am to have a holiday. Where shall we go?"

"Where would you like to go?"

"May we go where I like?"

"Yes; but what do you think of the Zoo?"

"Oh, I know it so well."

"Would you like Maskelyne and Cook's?"

"No; I want to do something else, and it will take the whole day long. Thompson—dear, darling——You don't mind my calling you Thompson, do you?"

"Well, Chris, I am accustomed to it by now, am I not?"

"Of course you are; and you are a dear!"

Christian flung her arms round her governess's neck, and rubbed her soft cheek against Miss Thompson's somewhat lined one.

"What I should really like, Thompson dear——"

"What is that, Christian?"

"Well, to hang on your arm and walk very close to you, and chatter all the time."

"You may."

"And not wear my best dress."

"You may wear your common dress."

"Then I do see that things are going to be heavenly! I want to walk slowly—very slowly—up Oxford Street, and then down Regent Street, and then down Piccadilly, and then up Bond Street; and perhaps we might go to Baker Street. And while we are walking I want to watch and watch, and look and look——"

"At the shops, do you mean?"

"No, no; things in the streets."

"What things, love?"

"Little Italian girls and boys with monkeys and tambourines; and Happy Families, too. Oh, I do love Happy Families!"

"But you can see them any day in the Square."

"Yes; but I want to look at them with fresh eyes."

"Fresh eyes, Christian?"

"Yes. I dreamt about a little Italian girl last night, and I felt that I loved her."

"We can easily see them," said Miss Thompson, "wherever we are; and it needn't take the whole day."

"When we are tired we can have lunch somewhere," continued Christian; "and I should like to give the Italians a lot of buns, and the monkeys some nuts. Oh! I want to stare well at them all. I want to see for myself what the little Italians look like, and how they do their dancing, and how they manage their monkeys."

"You are a strange child, Christian; but there is nothing wrong in your wish to see the Italians. Have you any other desires?"

"Well, I should like—only I'm afraid you won't do it—to go into an awfully slummy place, and walk upstairs and see what the bedrooms are like, and to question some of the women as to what they eat, and how much they pay for what they eat. For, you see, even if you have close on eight pounds, it can't be expected to last forever. Oh, dear! what have I said? Have I said anything very, very funny, Miss Thompson?"

"Yes, Christian, you have; but then, you are eccentric."

"So I am. Will you be such a darling as to take me into a slummy place?"

"Certainly not. You may look at the Italians from a distance, but we will keep in clean streets if you please. Now go and put on your things; I will give you the best sort of day I can."

CHAPTER IV

GRANDMOTHER'S DINNER

CHRISTIAN had, on the whole, a very interesting day. She had never been so captivated by Italian children before. She watched and watched the pretty movements, the quick gestures, the gleam of the white teeth, the shining dark eyes. The little monkeys, too, were all that was pathetic. She quite made up her mind that she and Rosy would earn their living in the future as Italian girls—that they would have a monkey and a tambourine each, and go about and dance and beg for money, and have a happy time.

" Only we must not do it near home," thought Christian, " for we might be discovered. It would be indeed too terrible a fate if, when father and mother are away in Persia, Miss Neil should catch sight of us. I should be punished then; and poor, poor Rosy—her mother would half kill her."

Christian's thoughts were so full of keen interest that morning that Miss Thompson began to consider her a very delightful girl. She was startled, however, in the midst of lunch, which they were both enjoying immensely, by the young girl bending forward and saying in an emphatic voice:

" If it was necessary for your career, would you greatly mind being dyed with walnut-juice?"

" My dear Christian, what a strange remark!"

" But I wish you'd answer it," said Christian emphatically.

"I can't understand. It could not be necessary for my career."

"But if it was. If it made all the difference between success and failure, between prison and liberty, which would you choose?"

"Oh, the walnut-juice, of course," said Miss Thompson. "But, all the same, I fail to understand."

"I don't want you to understand any more, dear Thompson; and you know you are quite a darling. You are coming out in the very nicest character. I hope I shall have more and more holidays, for I do like going about with you."

Miss Thompson was to remember Christian's remarks later on, but certainly at the present juncture they had no meaning for her.

When the young girl came back late that evening she was informed by nurse that Mrs. Mitford had sent her an invitation.

"You are to put on your very best company frock, Miss Christian, and to look as nice as ever you can, for you are to go down to sit with your mamma in her boudoir this evening. Mr. Mitford will be out, and you are to have supper with her. She means to have supper in her boudoir, and she says that you are to keep her company."

Nurse expected Christian to shout with delight, but she was silent and looked rather grave.

"Aint you glad, my darling?" said the old woman.

"Nursey," said Christian, "did you ever have the feeling that you were too glad and yet too sorry to be able to say what you felt? On the whole, I'd rather not see too much of mumsy at present; but if I must I must, and if I go I'd like to look nice. Make me very, very nice, please, nursey dear."

Nurse set herself willingly to accomplish this task, and Christian in her white silk frock, with its many ruchings and ribbons and soft laces, and with her fair hair hangng down her back, made as interesting and pretty a picture as the heart of mother could desire.

"There, darling!" said the old woman; "you are like no one else, my own Miss Christian. Kiss me and go."

Christian ran up first to her attic. She had secured a broken looking-glass, rather a large one, which she had placed in such a position that she could see herself when she acted the parts of her different heroes and heroines. From time to time she had induced the housemaids to give her candle-ends, and she possessed a large box of these interesting remnants. She lit a couple of dozen now, put them in different positions, and was at last able to get a good view of her own young figure. She was a rather tall and very upright girl, and she looked her best to-night.

"Is it I or is it another girl?" thought Christian.

Her quick imagination pictured the different heroines of history. Which should she select as her own rôle to-night? Finally, after a steadfast glance into her face, she decided to belong to the army of martyrs, and to imagine herself back in the time when people died for their faith. It seemed to her that she read resolution, determination, and unflinching self-sacrifice in her eyes.

She blew out the candles, gave a little sigh of relief, and ran downstairs. Her mother was waiting for her. Mrs. Mitford was very prettily dressed, the boudoir looked charming, the fire burned brightly, the lamps were pretty with their shaded globes, but Christian could not help giving a guilty glance towards that window behind whose thick, soft curtains she had listened to the story of her proposed fate.

"Only it isn't my fate," thought the child, "for I am determined—quite determined—to choose the life of the free."

Supper was already on the table, and Christian had to take her place.

"I hope you will like the meal I have had prepared for you, Chris," said her mother. "Johnston, you need not wait," she continued, turning to the footman; "we will ring when we want anything: I have quite thought about this little meal with you, Chris," continued Mrs. Mitford, "and I ordered soles. You love soles, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, mumsy; we never have anything nice and tasty of that sort in the schoolroom."

"They have got so terribly expensive," said Mrs. Mitford in a fretful tone. "After the soles we will have pheasant; you are fond of pheasant. And you shall pour out the coffee by-and-by. As the sweets—children always adore sweets—I hate them myself, but I suppose there will be something brought up for you. I ordered a savory for myself, but left your sweets to cook."

"And I'd ever so much rather eat a bit of your savory, mother; I don't so specially care for sweets," said Christian.

She was somewhat depressed, and yet she was happy. The delicately served meal was quite to her taste. She said to herself:

"This will be something to remember by-and-by when Rosy and I are eating red herrings and stale bread. I'll often talk to Rosy about this meal. I feel to-night as though I wasn't Christian Mitford at all, but someone else; not a poor martyr, but a sort of queen. How pretty mother looks! I shall never be pretty like her. Yes, she has a darling, sweet face, but——"

Christian did not follow up this "but," only it lay like a weight near her heart.

The meal came to an end, the savory was disposed of, coffee appeared and vanished, and presently Mrs. Mitford and her daughter were alone.

"Now, mumsy," said Christian, "come and sit on this deep sofa and let me cuddle up to you. Let me think that I am a very little girl once more; I want you to pet me and stroke my face. I want to put my head on your shoulder. You don't mind, do you, darling?"

"Oh, Christian!" said Mrs. Mitford, the tears rushing to her eyes, "I only wish you were a little, little girl. Big girls don't suit me half as well. I used to pet you such a lot, and you were so pretty. Don't you remember the time when I took you out driving in your dark-blue velvet pelisse and your blue hat? Don't you remember how the people used to remark on my very pretty little girl?"

"Yes, mumsy," said Christian; "but you can imagine I am your very pretty little girl again, can't you, mumsy?"

Mrs. Mitford said she could; but she was small and Christian was big, and the weight of the child's head on her shoulder tired her. Presently she sat up restlessly and said:

"We are wasting our time; I have a great deal to talk to you about. I don't often see you; I am so busy, you know."

"Yes, mother," said Christian; "but it seems a pity, doesn't it?"

"It can't be helped, dear. Your father is a man of great importance, and I am obliged to be with him all I can. And this is the time for your education. I want you to be a very accomplished girl. I don't care a bit about learning or anything of that sort, but I do want you to play well—so well that people will talk and look at you, and remark on the brilliancy of your touch. And I want you to have a lovely voice. When you are old enough you must have the very best instruction for that. And then I want you to paint a little, and recite; recitations are very popular, only they must be well done. And I want you, of course, to be a good linguist; your

French must be perfect. By-and-by you shall go to Paris to get a proper accent. German is nice too, but not so important as French. Italian would be useful; you are sure to spend a few years in Italy. You must dance beautifully; but then there is no doubt on that point, for you dance well already."

Christian sat very upright; she did not speak.

"Well," said her mother, "does my list of accomplishments appeal to you? Do you want to be all that your mother could desire?"

"You leave out some things," said Christian—"the story part—all about history and the lovely, lovely things that happened long ago. I don't want just to be——"

"Just to be what, dear?"

"I can't explain myself; but when I think—oh, mumsy! I will tell you. You mustn't be angry with me, but I don't want to be a brilliant, accomplished girl; I want to be a heroine."

"You silly, silly child! A heroine! What do you mean?"

"I want to be the sort of girl who would do great things—who would——"

But Mrs. Mitford interrupted her with a little scream.

"You want to be an oddity," she said, "an eccentric horror. Don't come to me and expect my approbation if you are anything of that sort."

Just at that moment the room door was opened, and who should come in but Mr. Mitford. His wife gave a start when she saw him.

"I found I could get away earlier than I expected," was his remark. "I fancied Chris would be with you, and I thought we could have a talk. You both look very charming."

Christian sat close to her mother.

"What a contrast you both are!—you so dark and piquant, and Christian so tall and fair and blonde. You are very like your grandmother, Chris, and she was a very beautiful and noble woman."

Mrs. Mitford sighed. The color deepened in her cheeks.

"I believe," she said, with a laugh, "that Christian will resemble her grandmother in more ways than one. You know what an eccentric woman she was."

"She was a very good woman, you mean," said Mr. Mitford.

"Yes, Patrick; but eccentric—very eccentric. Do you remember when she insisted on giving up her own dinner to send it to the invalid who lived on the other side of the street? It was ridiculous of her."

"Do tell me!" said Christian suddenly. "Did granny give her dinner to a sick person at the opposite side of the street?"

Mr. Mitford laughed. His dark eyes fixed themselves on Christian's animated face. He stepped up to her, and putting his hand under her chin, looked down at the speaking, bright features.

"You are like her," he said, with a sigh, "the same eyes, the same determined chin, the same expression. Well, my child, I can wish you nothing better than to be as good as your grandmother."

"But tell me about the dinner, father."

Mr. Mitford laughed; then his face grew grave.

"We kept a most perfect cook, for your grandmother was singularly particular with regard to her food. She had a very small appetite, but she always wanted the very best prepared for her, and she could not worry herself about ordering her own food; she liked it to come as a surprise. Now, Adams suited your grandmother's palate to perfection. Day by day the most delicious little dinners were served up. Well, one evening, I don't exactly know how she discovered it, but your grandmother happened to know that there was a poor lady in the opposite house who refused to eat anything. She was poor, and the house she lived in was nothing like as large and expensive as ours. Your grandmother feared that Mrs. Stirling had not a cook to her taste, so that evening she sent her own special dinner to her. When she found she liked it she sent it again every night."

"But why couldn't she have more dinner cooked for the sick woman?" interrupted Christian.

"Ah, that was the point. Adams would only prepare this very special and choice dinner for your grandmother. She could not be worried to do it for anyone else. Had your grandmother told her that the special meals were to go to Mrs. Stirling they would not have been worth eating, so she gave her own dinner and went hungry. The thing lasted for three weeks."

"And then?" asked Christian.

"Mrs. Stirling died. The people said afterwards that your grandmother's dinners kept her alive for ten days, and that she enjoyed them so much that she used to think about them all day long until they came. The thing was just like your dear old grandmother; she was an oddity, but most unselfish."

"It was a splendid thing to do," said Christian. "It was exactly the very thing I mean to do. I always thought granny looked nice—I mean from her picture—but now I am certain about it. She is a great heroine, and I mean to copy her."

"There, Patrick!" cried his wife; "what mischief you have done by telling Christian that absurd story! There always was a vein of oddity in Christian. I hope you will speak seriously to her, and tell her that during our abs—— I mean henceforward we wish her to attend to her accomplishments, that when she is grown up, and—we have time, we will take her out and be proud of her."

Mr. Mitford continued to stand near Christian, and once again he looked into her face; then he said, with a sigh:

"A girl such as your mother has described would be quite acceptable to me. But come, Chris, what have you got in your head?"

"Only that I want to be a heroine," she said.

She stood up as she spoke. Her face looked tired.

"I want to do something big; I want people to remember me when I am dead. I'd like to have a great big obelisk put up over me, and words written on it. And I'd like it to be pointed to, and people to say, 'The woman in memory of whom that obelisk was erected was a benefactress.' That is what I'd like to be, but mother wants me to be——"

"Yes," said her father, who was frowning as well as smiling, and looking with intense earnestness at the child, "and what does mother want you to be?"

"A musician, and to be able to dance; a linguist, and a fine singer. Oh! she wants common, common things——"

"They're admirable things," said the father sternly. "I agree with your mother. But why, my dear child, should not a benefactress be able to sing and dance, and make the world brighter all round? Don't get confused in your mind, Christian. You can be as accomplished as anyone in the world and yet be a noble woman."

Christian looked puzzled. "I didn't think of that," she said. "I do so want to do something—to be a heroine—and I care so little about being just accomplished."

"You had better go to bed now, Christian," said her mother, beginning to yawn. "Always do your duty; that is the main thing. Here is a sovereign for you, pet. You can go out to-morrow and buy something."

Christian looked at it. Her face grew scarlet. Suddenly she said:

"But may I keep it? If I don't really want to spend it, may I keep it?"

"Of course you may, if you wish; but what a funny child!"

Mr. Mitford kissed his daughter with much more consideration than he was wont to give to her. Mrs. Mitford gave her a passionate hug.

"Good-night, darling," she said.

When she left the room Christian's parents looked at each other.

"Upon my word," said Mr. Mitford, "Christian astonished me to-night."

"I do trust she won't grow up odd!" was Mrs. Mitford's answer.

"My dear," said her husband, "don't you see that the child is a budding genius? I always thought so, but to-night I am sure of it. I wish I hadn't accepted that appointment, Mary. It is very sad to be parted from that young creature, the only child we have, for six long years."

Mrs. Mitford began to cry.

"Don't, Mary," said her husband in a distressed voice. "It is worse for me to see you mope even than to see Christian moping."

"What I feel so awful," said Mrs. Mitford, "is her not knowing—her thinking that we are to go on as usual. Poor Christian!"

"It is best," said her husband in a decided voice. "I could not stand her tears; I am afraid I am a sad coward, but it's a fact. Of course, she will get over it."

"Get over it," said Mrs. Mitford, with a laugh. "Of course she will. She'll just fret for a bit at first. But that is a splendid school, isn't it?"

"Yes; I went to see it. I liked everything about it. Miss Peacock is a woman in a thousand."

"She will be very happy," said Mrs. Mitford. "She wants companions, and Miss Neil will be nice to her when she takes her there. She won't have time to fret. Time flies when you are young. She'll be too busy to fret; don't you think so, Patrick?"

"I hope so," he answered; "but I don't believe she is an ordinary child. There, Mary! don't let us talk about her now any more. We must settle other matters to-night."

He pulled some papers out of his pocket, and soon husband and wife were absorbed in abstruse calculations.

Meanwhile Christian put her treasured sovereign into the box which contained all her money.

"Certainly fortune seems to favor me," thought the child. "I shall have eight sovereigns now. Won't Rosy and I have a time!"

She sat down near the fire and began to think. Presently nurse came in.

"Tut, tut, Miss Christian!" she said; "you aint to be dreaming there any longer. You're to go to bed."

"Nursey, I love you," said Christian suddenly.

She ran to the old woman and put her arms round her neck.

"Nursey, did you ever hear that wonderful story about my granny?"

"What story, darling?"

"About her giving her nice, lovely dinner to the dying woman."

"It was like her," said nurse.

"Did you know my granny, nurse?"

"Know her?" exclaimed nurse. "Rather! There weren't her like anywhere to be found. She was always too good for——"

Nurse drew herself up abruptly. She had meant to say, "Too good for the present Mrs. Mitford," but she restrained herself.

"There wasn't her like in God's world," she continued. "Dear, it were a sorrowful day when she died."

"Was she very old?" asked Christian.

"No, lovey, not specially—a little past sixty."

"That sounds very old," exclaimed Christian.

"It aint when you come up to it," said nurse. "I'm sixty-five, and I don't count myself such an old woman. It's wonderful what a different view you take of sixty when you are, so to speak, nigh to it."

Christian did not find this an interesting subject. She said after a moment:

"Was granny like me—in appearance, I mean?"

"Well, now, darling, sometimes it has come over me that you have got her build; but you being young and she old, it's difficult to say. Still, I own that you have got her build."

"Father thinks that perhaps I have got her spirit."

"God be thanked if that is so, Miss Christian. It was her wish that you should be called Christian. It was her own name; she inherited it from the Quakers. Her grandfather was a Quaker, and a very strict one; and her mother was called Christian, and then you were, darling. She thought a sight of the name. She said the one thing that fretted her in not having a daughter of her own was not being able to call her Christian."

"Was she fond of me when I came?" asked Christian.

"Yes; she'd often take you in her arms and kiss you, and say that she hoped the spirit of her grandfather, Quaker Joseph Bunn, would descend upon you. But there! you aint to be stopping up any more, so up to bed you go."

Christian went to bed. She felt very thoughtful. Her conscience did not prick her at the thought of running away. She was still firmly convinced that even her father, who had seemed much nicer than usual to-night, would not mind when once she was out of sight.

"'Out of sight, out of mind' with father and mother," thought the little girl. "And I could never, never live in a strict-discipline school."

Nevertheless Christian knew as she dropped asleep that her grandmother would not have acted as she was going to do. Having always held herself in strict discipline, she would not run away from it. She would obey; she would subdue herself.

"Then I can't be like granny," thought Christian, turning restlessly from side to side on her pillow, "for I want my own way; and I won't go to school, for the school mother has described is a sort of prison."

With an effort she turned her thoughts from her granny and her own secret desire to resemble her, and she thought, until sleep visited her, of Rosy. For the very next day Rosy was to come, and Rosy was to tell her all she had discovered; and they were finally to make their plans, for the time when Christian would run away from Russell Square was close at hand.

CHAPTER V

CHANGE OF A SOVEREIGN

WHEN Rosy arrived on the following evening she looked very much excited; her eyes were bright, and there was a lot of color in her cheeks. Beside her Christian looked pale and scarcely pretty at all.

The little girl sat down on a stool near the fire in the nursery and warmed her hands, chatted loud and long to nurse, and laughed continually.

" One would think," said nurse after a pause, " that you did not love Miss Christian one little bit. I never saw anyone in such riotous spirits, and I must say it aint becoming."

" Oh, don't I love Christian ? " said Rosy. " Don't you go and draw wrong conclusions, great-aunt. I love her better nor anybody else—there ! "

" Well, child, that's all right. Here comes Miss Christian. Now listen, Rosy. You are not to stay long ; you are to go away in about half-an-hour, for my young lady lookes very peaky."

Christian sat by the fire. Nurse gathered up her work and prepared to go into the schoolroom. She knew the children would like to be alone, and she had promised to help Miss Thompson in her constant search after Christian's possessions.

" A more untidy child I never saw," said Miss Thompson when the old woman entered the room. " But there ! I do pity her. I think it is perfectly awful the way the poor child is kept in the dark. It is that that worries me."

"Well," said nurse, "there's sense in it too. She won't have time to fret; it will be one sharp blow and then the worst will be over. Miss Christian has got fancies and all kinds of romances about her, and she'd conjure up horrors like anything. Children who conjure up ought to be kept from brooding; that's what I say."

Meanwhile the two girls in the cozy nursery were sitting side by side.

"I have eight sovereigns," began Christian. "I've got another since I saw you last. Mother gave it to me."

"Oh, golloptious!" said Rosy.

"Do you think eight sovereigns will go a long, long way? Do you think they will be enough till we have made our fortunes by being tambourine and dancing girls?" exclaimed Christian.

"To be sure they will!" answered Rosy. "Now, Christian, you listen. I have it planned splendid. You'll have to do it this way, and this alone. My friend that I told you of aint much to look at, but she's clever. My word! I never came across anyone with such brains. I spoke to her last night. She is apprenticed to a dressmaker next door to mother, and she's sick of it."

"But my eight pounds won't support three people," said Christian, speaking hastily, and with a strong dislike to Rosy's friend rising up at once in her heart.

"You needn't fear that," said Rosy. "Judith aint going to have anything to do with us; she couldn't if she wished, for she's apprenticed to a dressmaker, and her mother would be mad if she even thought of such a thing. But what she will do is this. She'll meet us and take us to some nice lodgings, where we can stay all by ourselves for a couple of days. If you say the word to-night, Miss Christian, she'll hire the little room for us. I said you wouldn't mind it being humble, and she said she knew one in a very respectable house—of course nowhere near here—a little room at the top, where there'd be a cozy bed for us. Think of you and me sleeping so warm side by side. And we could have a fire if we wanted it, and we could cook red herrings and make our own tea."

"It would be fun," said Christian, her eyes gleaming. "Children have done that before when they were poor, haven't they? It would be like the old story-books about children who lived in London and nearly starved but came out all right in the end."

"Yes, yes," said Rosy; "but you listen. She'll take the room to-morrow if you say the word, and it will be all ready for us when we get there on Tuesday."

"Oh," said Christian—"Tuesday! But oughtn't we to run away on Monday?"

"No; that won't do at all. I told Judith, and she said you'd be found out. What you must do is this. You must get to the station. You must walk up to the book-stall. You say to that Miss Neil that you want a picture-book——"

"Which I don't," said Christian. "I hate picture-books."

"Well, any sort; it don't matter. Then you watch your chance and mix up with the crowd and come out, and stand outside and wait for me."

"But how will you know what station to go to?"

Rosy laughed. "You'll say that I am very clever when I tell you," she answered. "Do you know that I picked up a letter that your mother had dropped, and it was from that fine school of yours—oh! I wouldn't like to be imprisoned there—and all directions were given. You were to go from Paddington Station; so I'll be there, and so will Judith, and we'll take you away before Miss Neil finds out anything. Don't you see what a splendid plan it is? Your father and mother will be off two hours before you, and they won't be fretted at all. By the time the news reaches them that you are lost, you may be able to write a letter and tell 'em that you are earning your own living in London and doing fine."

Christian's cheeks were now almost as red as Rosy's.

"It does sound too splendid," she said. "I wonder if I'll have strength to do it."

"Why, Miss Christian, what do you mean?"

"Well, you know, Rosy, it isn't good of me; it's downright bad of me."

"Oh, I didn't know," said Rosy, "that we was to think of the virtues. I thought you wasn't a bit that sort of goody-goody kind."

"Nor am I," said Christian, reddening. "But since I saw you I have heard about my grandmother, and she—she was wonderfully good. And she had spirit, too, Rosy—far more spirit than either you or I have. But she never thought of pleasing herself; that was the amazing thing about her."

"Well, no one can call you selfish, Miss Christian."

"But when I run away from the strict-discipline school I do please myself, don't I?" answered Christian.

Rosy had no answer for that; but presently her little face puckered up and she began to cry.

"I was that troubled," she began, bringing out the words through her sobs; "and Judith Ford—I promised her five shillings; so I did. I knew you'd pay it for getting her to hire the room and for going to Paddington with me. And I thought I wouldn't be scolded any more, nor have my finger pricked by the horrid needlework, nor anything of that sort; and now——"

"Well?" said Christian.

"You are backing out of it; I can see that. You aint half nor quarter as anxious about it as you were when last we met."

"You needn't be frightened," said Christian coldly.

"I asked you to help me, and I mean to go through with it; but as to its not being painful—I know it will be necessary, but it is horribly painful. I can scarcely bear to look my mother and father in the face."

"Well!" said Rosy, "I could look mother straight enough in the face. I didn't sauce her half as much today, for thinking that I'd be away from her and the horrid needlework in less than a week. Oh, I am happy! And we'll get a little monkey and tambourines, and we'll practise like anything in our dear, snug little room; and we'll start walking along the streets and getting pence from the passers-by by the end of next week."

Christian's eyes once again sparkled. The scheme was fascinating. She found herself, as it were, between two positions. At one side was the school, strict—very strict—far away from London, where she would be received and, as it were, locked up in prison for years and years and years; no holidays to look forward to, for holidays were to be spent at school; no friends that she loved to greet her or speak to her. She was slow in making friends, and Rosy was dearer to her than any other girl. Certainly the other prospect was more alluring. It did not occur to her that the small room would be anything but spotlessly clean, with snowy sheets to the bed, and pretty, bright furniture, and a dear little fire in the grate; and she *had* always longed to taste red herrings. She thought that the food of the poor would be nice as a change—at least for a time. Then there would be the life in the open air, and the other tambourine-girls looking on and envying and wondering. And the monkey should certainly be called Jacko, for there was no other name so sweet for him. And she would love him and teach him no end of tricks, and he would sleep with her at night.

"Yes, Rosy, I will do it," she said. "I am sorry I seemed to hesitate. You can't quite understand everything about me; but I'll do it safe enough."

"That's right," said Rosy. "And now, do you think, Miss Christian, that you could let me have five shillings?"

"What for?" asked Christian.

"Well, it's for this: Judith can't hire us a room unless she pays in advance. She has one now in her mind's eye—a beauty—like a bird's nest, she said—the cosiest spot on earth. She wouldn't like to lose it. She must get it to-morrow, and we'll take possession of it on Tuesday, but we must pay a week in advance."

"I have only got my sovereigns," said Christian. "It will seem rather strange my changing one."

"All right," said Rosy; "only I don't suppose I dare come again. Can't you get it for me anyhow? Great-aunt has always a lot of change, I know."

Christian considered, and then she went into the schoolroom. Her purse containing her treasure was in her own private desk, and that desk stood on a little round table near one of the windows. It was always kept locked, and Christian kept the key fastened on to her watch-chain. She unlocked the desk now and took out the purse. The night before she had deposited the new sovereign with its seven companions. She looked sadly at her little store. It seemed a pity to break it. But, after all, Rosy's request was reasonable; Judith Ford could not be expected to get a room for them without money.

Both nurse and Miss Thompson were in the room, and they looked attentively at Christian as she entered.

"Well, Miss Christian," said nurse, "has Rosy made herself scarce? Quite time for her to do it, little puss!"

"Yes, Christian, you really must go to bed now," said Miss Thompson.

Christian colored. "I want to change this," she said, and she laid the sovereign on the table.

"Whatever for, my pet?" said nurse.

"It is for Rosy; I want——"

"No; nothing of the kind," said nurse—"nothing of the kind! I'm not going to have my great-niece taking presents from you, Miss Christian; and money, too, forsooth! Just like the brass of that little thing! But I'll soon——"

"Nursey, nursey," cried Christian, almost in tears, "you don't know; you can't understand. Please—please let me have some change; I want to give Rosy five shillings. It isn't as a present; it is for something she is to do for me."

"Of course you can have the change, Christian," said Miss Thompson; and she went to her desk, and presently laid half a sovereign and four half-crowns on the table. She took up the sovereign, and Christian ran into the nursery with the money.

"Here it is," she said, thrusting two half-crowns into Rosy's hands; "and I had great work to get it. Nursey thought I wanted to give you a present."

"I'll have something to say to my great-aunt if she doesn't change her manners," was Rosy's response. "Thank you, Miss Christian; you couldn't, I suppose, let me have another half-crown as well?"

"What for?" said Christan, who felt that her money was already beginning to melt with wonderful rapidity.

"Well, you see, miss, it is to pay for Judith's time, and for me and her to go to Paddington in time to meet you. This sort of thing can't be done without a little outlay, Miss Christian. Afterwards, when we are settled down, we'll be as economical as you like."

"There, take it," said Christian.

She thrust the money into Rosy's hand and dashed from the room. She did not even wait to bid her friend good-night; she felt at that moment that she almost disliked her.

CHAPTER VI

SIX LONG YEARS

MONDAY night had arrived. The long days of waiting and suspense were nearly over. Christian looked paler than ever. She no longer asked questions or tried to draw people into betraying themselves. She often sat for half an hour at a time staring straight before her. Nurse was frightened when she looked at her; even Miss Thompson did not care to meet her gaze.

Shortly after tea on Monday evening Miss Thompson ran downstairs and burst suddenly into Mrs. Mitford's presence. Mrs. Mitford was engaged with her own packing, which had to be done in the most judicious way. She had given the child to understand that she and her father were going to the south of France for a time.

" We *are* going there," she said to the governess. " Don't look at me so reproachfully. You know we are going to Marseilles, and surely that is the south of France."

" Well," said Miss Thompson, " I must speak. I don't like it, Mrs. Mitford; I don't like it at all. I'm glad the time of deception is over. Sometimes, do you know, I think Christian guesses."

" Christian guesses ! " cried her mother. " How could she ? I hope you have been careful. I told you all her things were to be packed in the north spare-room. She is taking almost everything new with her. She needn't have known anything. You have told; you have betrayed your trust."

"No, I have not," said Miss Thompson quietly. "I have been as careful as a woman could be. But Christian is a sharp child, and she can put two and two together. I suppose, Mrs. Mitford, you will soon tell her now?"

"She is coming down to see me after dinner this evening. Her father will be present. We will tell her then," said Mrs. Mitford.

The governess was turning to leave the room. Once again she came back.

"I know you won't do it," she said, "and yet I long to ask you to. I do so wish you would let me take her to school instead of——"

"Really!" said Mrs. Mitford.

She was a very imperious little woman; she hated anyone even to suggest that her way was not the right way.

"Really!" she repeated. "I am sorry, but I cannot have my plans interfered with. My friend Miss Neil will take Christian to the school."

Tears sprang to Miss Thompson's eyes.

"It is only that she loves me, and she does not care for Miss Neil."

"Very silly of her!" said the mother. "She will have to see a good deal of Miss Neil while we are away. You would like me to write that recommendation for you tonight, Miss Thompson? Well, I have nothing but good to say of you. I hope you will get a comfortable situation before long."

"Thank you," said Miss Thompson a little coldly.

She left the room and returned to the schoolroom, where Christian was pretending to read a new story-book her father had given her that morning. It was rather old-fashioned. She did not exactly care for it; she thought there were too many characters, and that the plot was not brisk enough. Nevertheless she went on reading it. It would probably interest her later on; she knew that her mind was not with the written words that night.

"Do you know that you are to go down to see your father and mother after dinner?" said Miss Thompson.

"Yes, of course I do," said Christian.

She turned very white and dropped her book.

"You are not well, dear; you don't look at all well."

"I am quite well, thank you, Miss Thompson."

"What dress will you wear, Christian?"

"I don't think it matters much."

"They would like to see you looking nice. Your pink frock is new; will you put it on?"

"If you like."

It was between eight and nine that evening when Christian, beautifully dressed as usual, and looking tall and straight, and with a certain curious defiance about her, and yet with an inward trembling, passionate love vibrating through her frame, entered the presence of her father and mother. Of course she knew what was coming. They did not guess that, but the very fact, although it reduced her to despair, kept her also calm. There was no uncertainty about the moment that lay before her.

Mr. Mitford felt extremely nervous. He was fond of Christian—fonder than he cared to own. He was a very busy man, and seldom had more than a minute or two to devote to his wife and child, but he felt that Christian and he could be great friends if they had enough time to get better acquainted with each other.

Mrs. Mitford was certain that she would burst into passionate tears, and thus disgrace herself forever in her husband's eyes. Therefore, when Christian entered with her bold, firm step, she could not help looking at the child with admiration.

"She will be a beauty by and by," thought the mother; "she is remarkable-looking now."

The father, as he glanced at her, thought, "She is my mother over again; it is a sin to leave her."

Filled with a sudden tenderness, he moved up an inch or two on the sofa in order to make room for Christian to sit by his side.

"We have sent for you, Christian," said her mother; "we have—— You tell, won't you, Patrick?"

He was silent, looking straight across the room at his wife; his very lips were trembling. Christian pitied him so much that she almost prompted him. She very nearly said, "Go on about the school—the strict-discipline school, you know."

Mrs. Mitford in the interval rushed into the breach, and continued:

"You know, Christian, that we are going to the south of France to-morrow."

Christian did not answer. She gave a brief nod; her lips were firmly pressed together; her eyes were bright. She was saying to herself, "I won't cry. I won't let tears come; I won't—I won't—I won't!"

"Yes," said Mr. Mitford, "we are going to Marseilles; and on a longer journey."

Christian looked up at him. He took her hand. Once the ice was broken he continued more fluently:

"I am appointed Consul-General of Teheran in Persia. It is a very honorable position, and——"

Christian stirred restlessly. Mrs. Mitford looked at her.

"Why doesn't she speak?" she thought. "I quite expected her to say, 'And you will take me with you?' —to say those words very earnestly, and be passionate and troublesome about it."

But Christian did not say anything. She did not even express surprise.

"We go to-morrow morning," continued Mr. Mitford

—"your mother and I. Christian, child, why don't you speak?"

"I am listening, father," she said gravely.

"You are a good child," said her father, flinging his arm round her waist and squeezing her to him.

But she detached herself suddenly.

"I'd ever so much rather you didn't pet me while you are telling me."

"Oh, very well!" said Mrs. Mitford in a displeased tone. "I have always thought it, and I must say it: I don't think you have a scrap of heart, Christian. You are the only girl I have ever heard of who would submit to her parents leaving her for six years without even a murmur."

"You didn't say the number of years, mother," answered Christian.

"Stop, Mary," said her husband; "you must allow me to speak to the child. I am very pleased with you, Christian, for having control of your feelings. I don't for a moment think that you are heartless. Far from it," he added, putting his hand under her chin and looking into the deep eyes that could scarcely meet his gaze—"far from it," he continued, and he patted her on the shoulder. "You are a good girl, just like your grandmother, and you have got pluck and endurance. Now, do you know what we are going to do with you? You are our little girl, and very, very dear to us."

"Of course, Christian, you are our only child," said her mother. "We shall be very proud of you when we come back; you will be accomplished then. You will remember what I wish: you are to be a great musician and a great singer, and your French is to be——"

"My dear," said her husband, "had you not better let me explain to Christian what her position will be during our absence?"

"All right, Patrick; only I did think that the child would like her mother to talk to her."

"So I do, mother," said Christian.

She had a sudden wild impulse to rush up to that pretty little figure and fling herself into its arms; but she knew that her mother would not understand her. She had a sort of feeling that her father would, but she was not sure of him; so she sat still and held herself up for all she was worth, and thought at intervals under her breath, "I won't let the tears come—I won't!"

"We have considered this," said Mr. Mitford. "The thing has come suddenly, and there has been very little time. We could not take you with us, for the country is not suited for young people. No girl who is not grown up could go there. We shall be away for a long time, and during that time, Christian, you must be going on with your education in the best sense of the word. Threefold must that education be—don't forget that—body, soul, and spirit. When we return you will be—— How old are you now, Christian?"

"Thirteen," said Christian.

"Yes, dear, thirteen in August," interrupted Mrs. Mitford. "Can you not recall that hot August morning when we first saw our little Christian?"

"Yes, dear," replied her husband. "Well, Christian, you are thirteen. In six years you will be nineteen—a grown-up woman, ready to take up life seriously—a woman like your grandmother."

"You may as well turn Christian into a Quakeress at once," said the mother.

"The religious part of the question we need not discuss," said Mr. Mitford. "In six years' time Christian will be grown up. We shall return with pride and pleasure to embrace our dear daughter. Now, Christian, we have found a school for you—not an ordinary school by any means. The lady who is the Principal is Miss Peacock. She is a splendid woman; her character is superb. She is a great favorite with the girls who live under her roof. There are only forty girls, so it is a comparatively small school. The house is a beautiful old mansion, and the end of the garden is washed by the waves of the wide Atlantic. The school is in Cornwall, in one of the most healthy spots possible. In the summer you will have boating and yachting, in the winter riding. The climate, compared with that of London, is temperate, and you, who are fond of flowers, will have them in plenty. Each holiday Miss Peacock has promised to take you somewhere."

Christian's eyes grew bright.

"You will love her, for she is worthy of love. You are to be treated with singular indulgence."

"What about the strict-discipline school?" said Christian to herself.

"You are to have your own pretty room, and you are to be allowed to write your letters without having them looked over—that is, to your parents. There are some charming girls at the school, and they are all prepared to love you and be good to you when you arrive. My own dear girl, you will be there by this time to-morrow night. You will leave here early in the morning, and—— Don't cry, child; you really have been very brave."

"Do let me just for a minute," said Christian, flinging her arms round her father's neck.

Her reserve was broken; she sobbed as though her heart would break.

"Come and kiss me too, Christian," said her mother.

Mrs. Mitford was crying also. Christian sobbed more and more uncontrollably. Mr. Mitford got up and left the room.

"I couldn't expect her to keep up all the time," he thought. “ She was very brave at first, but those tears are terrible. Mary at least might have controlled herself. Mary is pretty, adored by society, but, compared to Christian, heartless. Poor girl, what a face was hers! I could have stood those tears, but that face of tragedy hurt me. Poor Christian! I could almost wish I had not taken that brilliant appointment. But there! it may lead to many things, and when a man has a child he ought not to be selfish. I do what I do for Christian, after all. Poor darling! somehow I never seemed to quite understand her or to appreciate her until to-night.”

CHAPTER VII

"THE REFORMATORY SCHOOL IS THE PUNISHMENT FOR ME"

ROSY, who was in some ways so very much wiser than Christian herself, had assured the young girl that her parents would not be at all frightened by her running away.

"They won't know anything about it," argued Rosy, "until they get a letter from your own self; and when you tell them, and they see it in your handwriting, that you are well and happy, they will be as pleased as Punch. I know it," continued Rosy, with emphasis, "for when I am real happy, even if it aint the very thing mother might have liked beforehand, she can't help getting a sort of delighted look on her face. It's the way of mothers, even if they are harsh ones; so think what it will mean to your father and mother, Christian, who love you like anything."

Christian was so much interested, and her mind was so fully made up, that she listened to Rosy's specious words, and even composed in her own mind the little letter she would presently write; a passionate letter, full of love, but at the same time with a beseeching tone running through its depths; the letter in which she would assure her father and mother that she would be the straightest, most upright, most unselfish, noble sort of tambourine-girl in the world.

After her father had left the room Christian lay still on the sofa, her arms around her mother's neck and her head buried against Mrs. Mitford's soft white neck. She had ceased to sob. She had almost ceased to feel.

By and by Mrs. Mitford roused the child.

"The years will pass quickly; your father and I will think of you, and the years will go by with lightning speed. Soon we shall be together again."

"Oh, no, mother," answered Christian; "it will be a long time—a long time!"

"You think so, dearest, but you are mistaken. Now, go to bed, darling; I daren't allow you to trouble yourself any longer. You must sleep, Christian, for my sake, or we shall both be ill to-morrow when we most want to be fresh and bright."

"Suppose, mother, I were to write you; when would you get the letter?"

"You had better write straight to Bombay. Your father and I will spend some weeks there before we proceed to Persia. You can write when you are settled at school. Here is the address."

Mrs. Mitford opened her desk, took out an envelope carefully addressed and stamped, and put it into the young girl's hand.

"Now, good-night, dearest. You will soon sleep sound. The worst will be over before long."

Christian left the room without another word. She scarcely kissed her mother as she parted from her. All of a sudden her conscience began to prick her. She dared not listen to it, however; there were others involved in the mad game she was playing. Whatever happened, she must go on with it. She got quickly into bed, covered her face with the clothes, and pretended to sleep. She was alone in the dark; even nurse had left her.

The house quieted down. Mr. and Mrs. Mitford were to leave at seven in the morning. Christian would not leave until nine, her train not going from Paddington until a few minutes to ten. Just before she dropped asleep she resolved, whatever happened, to be up in time to rush down to kiss her father and mother; but, what with her distress and the fatigue which her excitement had caused her, she slept heavily until nurse called her. She started up then with a cry. All that was to take place flashed upon her. There would be no nurse to-morrow morning; only a little room in the slums, and Rosy her companion. Well, even that was better than a strict-discipline school.

"Nursey," she cried, "what is the time?"

"Twenty minutes to eight, deary. You will have to leave soon after nine. I didn't want to wake you a minute before the time."

"But have they gone—have they gone?"

"Of course, darling; they left at seven. They came up, both of them, and kissed you. It went hard to see them, particularly my master. Ah! he's a good man, but maybe stern and a bit absent-minded; but he is a good man when all is said and told."

Christian did not say a word. The knowledge that her father and mother were really gone lay on her spirits as a crushing weight. Then she began quite wonderfully to cheer up. The worst was over. The pain of leaving the old house, the wonderful dream-attic where the happiest time of her childhood had been spent, nurse, the servants, Miss Thompson, was all as nothing.

She got up and dressed. She thought with a smile, how to-morrow she would be wearing very different clothes. She was not at all nervous; she was sure that Rosy's and her great plan would succeed.

Breakfast was over in a short space of time. Christian's private money had been put into a little bag under her skirt. Nurse had made the bag for her; it had a string attached to it, and nurse had shown the young girl how she ought to tie it round her waist.

"You are to get more money from time to time," said nurse; "and once a year I am to come down to Cornwall to see you. The place is called Penwerne, and is near to the town of Tregellick. They say the house is that beautiful! But there, darling, do eat something!"

Christian ate and drank. She then bade the servants good-by; she hugged Miss Thompson, but her last most fervent embrace was for nurse. Nurse cried, but Christian did not shed a tear. She had said good-by to her attic the night before, and had determined not to visit it again.

At last she was seated in the cab. Nurse and Miss Thompson promised to write to her, and Miss Neil, looking stiff and somewhat severe, desired the cabman to proceed, and they were off. The house in Russell Square seemed to vanish like a dream; they turned a corner and went rapidly in the direction of Paddington.

Christian scarcely spoke. There was a cold sensation round her heart; she wondered if Miss Neil would give her a chance to escape. She was soon relieved on that score.

"As soon as we get to the station, Christian," said her companion, "I will have your luggage registered. You have still a great deal of luggage, although one large box was sent off last week. I will see it registered, and you will stand by me. But we must get our tickets first."

Christian longed to ask a question or two, but her tongue clave to the roof of her mouth. She was so terribly afraid of betraying herself that she was silent.

They reached the great station, and Miss Neil, accompanied by her young charge, approached the ticket-office. A string of people were waiting their turn. Miss Neil bought a single first-class ticket for Christian and a return for herself. A porter was standing by with Christian's voluminous luggage piled up on his truck. Miss Neil and he entered into an animated conversation. They moved a little aside. Christian watched them, standing stock-still herself as though she were turned into stone.

Suddenly a wild desire to be going quietly down to Cornwall took possession of her. She considered for a minute how easy it would be for her to abandon her scheme, to stay by Miss Neil's side, to enter the carriage which she had selected, to be conscious of the fact that the luggage was in the luggage-van. There was nothing against her carrying out this sudden wish—nothing at all—except Rosy's disappointment and Judith Ford's annoyance. Christian would be going to the school selected by her father and mother, and all would be well.

"I could send Rosy a letter through nurse," thought the young girl, "and I would send her a whole sovereign in a postal order. She could give some of it to Judith, and there would be an end of the matter. I think I will give it up," was her next thought. "Now that it is so near, it seems too awful to go through."

But just then Miss Neil turned and spoke sharply to her:

"Don't stay back there, Christian; come to my side. And pray, don't stand on one foot in that ugly way. Do hold yourself erect; I hate the manner in which girls hold themselves nowadays. Thank goodness, when you are at Penwerne you will be taught that and other matters! Yes, it is a good thing you are going to that severe school. What did you say?" she continued, turning to the porter. "Over weight? But we have first-class tickets. One pound to pay? Preposterous!"

"Well, madam, I assure you——" began the man.

He and Miss Neil entered into a sharp dispute, while

Christian glided away. She would carry out her scheme; Miss Neil herself had decided it.

Two minutes later she was in the affectionate embrace of Rosy Latimer, while Judith Ford, a rough-looking girl with a freckled face and high cheek-bones, stood near. She wore a showy hat with a lot of cheap red velvet on it. Her jacket was too small for her, and her gloves had holes in them. Christian scarcely glanced at Judith Ford.

"Come, quick!" said Rosy. "Oh, aint you a darling? Aint we going to have a good time? Oh, Christian! you don't know what Judith has done for us."

"Don't you tell," cried Judith. "You always do let the cat out of the bag. We'll let Christian see for herself."

"Christian," thought the young girl, "Christian. Have I come to be called that by a girl of the Judith Ford type?"

The three girls ran down a side street, and a moment later Judith beckoned to the driver of a decrepit-looking cab with a broken-down horse to draw up to the edge of the pavement. They jumped in, and off they went. Christian tried to shut away from her imagination the sound of Miss Neil's excited, terrified voice when she missed her. She tried to shut away from her mental vision the thought of Miss Neil at all; she would forget her now. She would also forget the school at Penwerne, and the cozy first-class carriage. She would even cease to remember her parents, who must now be crossing from Dover to Calais. She would forget everything but the great, marvelous, wonderful adventure itself. Oh, how often during the last few days had she pictured it! Now she was living through it in reality. It was a big, big story—a wild, thrilling thing—she was about to live through it. She had been an imaginary heroine so often; now she would be a real one. Oh, yes, she was safe;

Miss Neil could not possibly find her. She was safe, and it was—yes, delicious.

But as this last thought came to her Judith's very sharp voice sounded on her ears, and Judith's emphatic nudge poked itself into her side.

"Why don't you talk?" cried Judith. "Be you the sulky sort, as hugs their grief to 'em and hasn't a word to say to their kind friends? Oh, won't we have a time to-night! You've got the chink all right, haven't you?"

"The what?" asked Christian.

Judith burst into a loud laugh.

"The chink," she cried. "Why, Rosy, is she such a softy as not to know what chink means? We'll teach her a few things, you and me; won't we, Rosy?"

"Miss Christian knows a lot of things," said Rosy. Her voice sounded quite refined in Christian's ears. "She knows ever so much that we don't know. We've got to treat her with respect," continued Rosy.

"Not a bit of it!" exclaimed Judith, with another loud laugh. "We're all in the same boat now."

Christian looked at her with a growing terror.

"And here we be," continued that young person. "Now then, cabby, look spry. There aint no luggage, so you must let us off cheap. How much is the fare, cabby? Don't you try to humbug me. I know a thing or two; as much as you do."

Judith began to haggle loudly. The cabman answered; Judith overtopped his voice with her screaming one. Poor Christian felt that the most strict-discipline school on earth would be paradise compared to her present surroundings. But, after all, Rosy had tact. She came up to her little companion and whispered in her ear:

"Judith aint going to stay, so don't you think it. She's just showing off, and no more. I've seen the room, and it's quite nice; and if we don't like it we can change, for we have plenty of money. Don't fret, Miss Christian; I can't abear to see that sort of look on your face."

"Come along now," said Judith, having settled her dispute with the cabman. "I lead; you follow. I'm leader in this game."

She entered a hideous, dirty, tumble-down house. Christian held her skirts tightly round her; she could not bear that they should touch the filthy walls. She scarcely liked to tread on the black and broken stairs.

They went up flight after flight, and at last entered a small attic at the top of the house. Compared to the stairs, it was fairly comfortable, but poor Christian had never imagined that anyone could live in a room of this sort.

"I was thinking," said Rosy, who was watching her little companion earnestly, "that you and me, Miss Christian might go out presently and buy a few things. You see, Judith," she added, turning to the other girl, "Miss Christian has been accustomed to a very different life."

"It will do her a sight of good to know how the poor live," was Judith's remark. "But as to buying things, you and she had better lie low for a day or two, for they're sure to make no end of a fuss, and have the police after her, and all the rest. It wouldn't do to have the police after us," continued Judith, fixing her malicious eyes full on Christian's white face, "for running away is a crime punished by law. You gets locked up for running away, and a pretty long sight of prison too, to say nought of the disgrace. You wouldn't like that, would you, miss?"

"It isn't true," said Christian. "I don't believe it."

"Oh, don't you, miss? Well, I'm sorry for you. There's a woman in the next room—a very nice friendly woman; her name is Mrs. Carter; she helped me to tidy up the room this morning. We'll ask her."

Before Christian could prevent her, Judith bounded into the adjoining room, and came out accompanied by a tall woman with a head of tousled hair, curl-papers all round her forehead, a broken bodice, and a red skirt. This woman had heard from Judith all about the proposed plan, and thought it a very fine joke indeed.

"This young lady is Miss Christian Mitford—the Honorable Miss Christian Mitford," said Judith, laughing. "You'll have to drop your curtsy to her, Mrs. Carter."

"I aint a-going to drop no curtsies to anybody who lives in this house," said Mrs. Carter.

Christian walked to the window and turned her back on the other inmates of the room. Oh, she was punished! was it true what that awful girl said, that if she were caught now the law of the land would put her in prison? She wished the ground would open and swallow her up. Oh, where was the delight and excitement of the adventure that had looked so fair before it began?

"You just tell her plain out what's the truth, Mrs. Carter," said Judith.

"About what, my dear?" said Mrs. Carter.

"Aint it the case, ma'am, that if you run away from your lawful guardians, you being, so to speak, a minor—that means under age, miss," she added, nodding to Christian—"aint it the case that you are locked up?"

Mrs. Carter looked hard at Judith. She then glanced at Christian. Christian was well dressed; beyond doubt she was rich. She must frighten her and then soothe her, for get money out of her she should, and would and could.

"Miss," she said, "I'm sorry for yer. My heart bleeds for yer, miss. Whoever made yer get into this scrape? It's true, miss; it's true. It happened to my first cousin. She was well born, miss—not like me. Her parents were most genteel. When a child she ran away from school, and for two years she was in a reformatory, miss—a prison-school. She was indeed, miss. She never come to any good; and she's in prison again now, miss, serving her time for burglarious action."

Christian had not the slightest idea what burglarious action was, but it had an awful sound. Her heart stood still with agony. It was scarcely likely that both Mrs. Carter and Judith were wrong. Mrs. Carter had her facts so glib, and she had such a wicked knowing look.

"I'm sorry for yer, miss, but the only thing for yer is to keep tight in here; and if the police come you can hide under my bed, miss, and you're kindly welcome. And if there's anything I can do for you young ladies in the way of hot water for making a drop of tea, or anything of that sort, you have but to tell me; for it's neighborly we'll be, miss, and you won't regret it so much when you know, so to speak, the in and out of our lives. We may be poor, but we have our good p'ints, and our moments of 'joyment too."

"You clear out now," said Judith, pushing Mrs. Carter towards the door. She shut it, and then came up to Christian.

"You'd best give me a little of the chink," she said, "and I'll go out and buy food for us all. I can show my nose as much as ever I like, for I haint run away; but you and Rose must keep tight, for if you show yourselves it's the reformatory school you'll get into. It's the reformatory school; that's the punishment for you."

CHAPTER VIII

PLAY-ACTING

WITH trembling fingers Christian lifted her skirt and produced the little bag which contained her precious savings. There were still seven pounds ten shillings in the bag, for she had given away the last half-crown of her first ten shillings to Judith in order to settle with the irate cabman. It was in reality only a one-and-sixpenny ride, but Judith, as she pocketed the shilling, assured Christian that it cost half-a-crown and was cheap at that. Christian knew too little about the ways of the poor to make any remark, but she did feel certain that her money would not go far if it was required at so rapid a rate.

"Here," she said, opening her bag and producing half-a-sovereign; "I ought to get a lot of change out of that."

"So yer will," said Judith, snatching it from her; "and I'll bring in all sorts of things. What do you think we'll want, Rosy? You'd best make a list."

"Oh! I wish I could go with you," said Rose, whose eyes glistened at the sight of the gold.

"But you can't," said Christian, "I should die if I were left alone in this awful, awful place."

"Awful, is it?" said Judith. "My word, you be hard to please! I 'ates the ways of your haristocrats, always with their noses in the air, sniffing at everything, pleased at nothing. The sight of trouble I had to get this sweet little room! And I'm sure it's as pretty a place as can be found. And if that aint a nice, clean bed for the two of yer to sleep in, I don't know where you'll find a better. And there's a fireplace and a table. And oh, my word! here's a cupboard in the wall. What more could the most particular desire? And here's a chest of drawers. Jolly, I call it! And two chairs—one for me, and one atween the two of you. If this room aint spry and cozy, the only thing I can say is that I hope you'll never find yourself worse lodged. Now then, Rosy, tell us what you want."

Rosy began to count on her fingers. She had arranged everything beforehand in her own acute little mind. She knew exactly the food they would require, the matches and the chips of wood for lighting the fire and the coal to fill the grate. She ordered matches and wood and coal now, also red herrings, a little loaf of the best fresh bread, some butter, some tea, sugar and milk.

"You must see about the coal the first thing," said Rosy; "we can't do any cooking until it has come. And, Judith, we must have a saucepan and a kettle and a little frying-pan, and some cups and saucers, and spoons and knives, and a pinch of salt, and wood to light the fire, and half a dozen eggs. Can you remember all those things?"

"That I can," said Judith; "but if you think there will be much change out of ten shillings you're uncommonly mistaken."

"But there ought to be," said Rose, her cheeks growing crimson. "Mother 'ud get all them things and have summat to spare out of five shillings. Look you, Judith, there aint to be any larks with Miss Christian's money. You're to bring back five shillings change, or I'll go out and buy the things myself, whether I'm caught or not."

The smirky, impudent look left Judith's face.

"We needn't stay here at all," continued Rosy. "Miss Christian might so happen to get tired of this here joke.

She might so happen to want to go back to her own people, and we will go back, both of us, even if they are angry, if you play any pranks. Now you understand."

Judith nodded. "It's a nice opinion you have of me, Rose Latimer," she said. "What pranks would a poor girl like me be up to? You needn't fret about me and my morals, Rose Latimer, for I'm as straight as a die, I can tell yer."

She ran downstairs, utterly regardless of the dirty walls and the broken stairs. She flew along, leaping over obstacles, and clearing two or three stairs at a time in her headlong flight.

When her steps had died away Rosy looked at Christian. Christian's back was to her; she was standing by the window. She had not removed her hat and jacket. In her heart was a dull weight—the weight of absolute despair. Even Rosy, as she watched Christian and seemed to guess by a sort of instinct what she was feeling, began to find the adventure less adventurous, and even began to see a certain amount of good in the dressmaker's room where she usually sat, cozy and warm, machining long seams and turning out yards and yards of flouncings. Yes, even the dressmaker's room was better than this attic, with Christian, as Rosy expressed it, in a sulk.

"Miss Christian," said the little girl.

Christian made no reply. She drew a step or two nearer the window, and stared out with the most forlorn feeling in her heart. The only view she could obtain from the very small dormer-window of the attic was of some of the neighboring roofs, black with smoke and smuts. They were hideous in the extreme. Christian had never before known what real, absolute ugliness meant. She shuddered, and yet, with a certain fascination, drew nearer. A cat, meant by nature to be white, but of a dull uniform gray, stepped gingerly over the roofs towards her.

He met a brother cat, and they saluted each other in the customary manner. Christian turned away with a shudder.

"Miss Christian," said Rosy again.

"What is it, Rose?"

"You are miserable," said Rosy, "and you blame me."

"Well, I never thought it would be like this. I never imagined anything so awful. And is it true that as we ran away we—we'd——"

"Nonsense, Miss Christian! I don't believe it's true for a single minute. It's only Judith's way to frighten you, miss."

"But Mrs. Carter said the same."

"Yes, Miss Christian, I know it; but she was put up to it by Judith."

"I thought you said you liked Judith—that you thought her a nice girl."

"I never seed her afore in the light I do to-day, miss, and that's the truth."

"Rose, I'm frightfully miserable."

"Well, I aint too happy," said Rose.

"Can't we get away from here? I'm frightened."

"We might creep out of a night, for certain, but in the daytime they're a-watchin us."

"Who? Who are watching us?" said Christian. She went up to Rose and clasped her hand in an access of terror.

"Well, that Mrs. Carter; and most like there are others in the house, and they all know you have money. I tell you what, Miss Christian, there's only one thing to do."

"What is that? Oh, what? Oh, I am frightened! I never thought I should be so terrified."

"It's a clear case when one ought to be terrified," said Rose, and she sank down on one of the chairs and stared straight in front of her. "Yes," she repeated, "it's clear it means terrifying; there aint a doubt of that."

"What is to be done?" said Christian. "Oh, if mother could see me now! Oh, father, father! Rosy, I'd rather be in the most awful strict-discipline school in the whole world than here."

"You think so because you aint at the school," was Rosy's astute reply. "Now, Miss Christian, let me think; don't speak for a minute. It were I who got you into this, so it must be me to get you out; that's but fair."

"It is—it is; but can you?"

"Let me think, miss. Judith will be back in half an hour. I'll think for a bit and then speak."

To Christian those few minutes seemed like eternity. At last Rosy stood up. She crossed the room, went to the door and examined it.

"There aint never a lock," she said. "That's bad. But we can put the chest of drawers agen' the door to-night, so that no one can come in without us hearing 'em. And if we are really frightened we can push the bed up agen' the chest, and squeeze it in between the door and the wall; then we'll be as snug and safe as any girls could be. Then we must take the first chance that offers to get away; we must. Judith aint what I thought her. We mustn't tell her—not on any account. We must steal away when she aint here. The folks here won't let us go if they think we want to, so we must pretend."

"Pretend?" said Christian, in amazement.

"For sure, miss; there aint no other way. We must pretend we are delighted—you to be free of the school, me to be your companion. We must have a right good time to-night and turn Judith's head with our merriment. We must laugh and sing and pretend to enjoy ourselves. We must have a sort of feast, and we must talk a lot about buying the tambourines; and Judith must see about hiring a proper tambourine-girl's dress for you and another for me. It will mean maybe five shillings more, but that can't be helped. We must catch 'em by guile, Miss Christian—Mrs. Carter and the rest. They must hear me talking to you about the awful prison life you has escaped, and you must say out very loud that you never did enjoy yourself so much before. We must take 'em in. You leave it to me, miss. You follow up when I speak. When I give you a look you will know what I mean. That's it, miss. Then to-morrow we'll creep away. If anybody meets us we'll say we are going out to buy things. We'll leave the cups and saucers and things behind us, and we'll never come back—never. That's what we must do. It's the only way, for I don't believe that we can be locked up for running away. But I do think the folks in this house will keep us from ever getting home again; or, at any rate, from getting home until they have got all the money they can from us."

Rosy spoke with great confidence. Christian felt cheered by her words.

"It will be horribly difficult," said Christian; "and I hate deceiving. I never did deceive anyone yet in my life."

"It's a case of play-acting," said Rose stoutly; "and if you aint been play-acting all your born days, I don't know who has. Haven't you been Joan of Arc one day, and Charlotte Corday another and poor me Marat in his bath, waiting for you to stab me—and William Tell and the characters in the Bible? There aint no fear that you can't act. You've just got to act once more."

"But what?"

"Why, a girl who loves the slums, and dotes on her freedom, and is determined that nothing shall make her a slave. Now you know what to do. Oh, here comes Judith! I'd know Judith's step in a thousand."

As Rosy said the last words she began to hum in a high, excited, staccato voice:

> "For Britons never, never, never shall be slaves."

Judith burst into the room. She carried a heap of parcels and a sack full of coal.

"If this aint love!" she said. "If this aint, so to speak, the height of devotion! Now then, look spry, both of you."

"Oh, yes," said Rosy, bursting into a loud and apparently delighted laugh, "you are good. Now we'll have fun. Bustle up, Miss Christian; take off your hat and jacket. See, aint I thoughtful? I brought a little apron for you in my pocket. You slip it on, deary miss, and then you won't spoil your nice things."

"What do it matter if she spoils her things or not?" cried Judith. "She can't go on dressing in that fashion; she'd be nabbed at once. The police would bustle round her just like birds round a strange bird. She'll have to dress like the poor folks. The best thing is to pawn her dress, and get her one of them thick woolen sort like the tambourine-girls wear from the pawn-shop."

"That's the right thought, Miss Christian, aint it?" said Rosy. "And you'll be sure to get a good price for such solid clothes as you wear. I could go out now and pawn them."

"No you don't!" said Judith. "If there's any pawning to be done, I do it. And you needn't think for a moment that your Miss Christian—your fine, guarded young lady, who'd get finely punished by the law of the land were it known what she'd done—would get much for her clothes. It's very, very little she'll get; although, of course, I'll do my best for her."

"Oh, I am so hungry!" said Christian, making a valiant effort to speak naturally.

For one instant she looked towards the window. It was like looking out of prison. Even the roofs, so close at hand, seemed to her at that moment the land of the free. But it was true she had often acted before, and she could and would act for dear life now. So she fell on her knees and began to build up the fire. How badly she did it! Judith roared with laughter, and dropping down by her side, began to give directions. Presently Rosy pulled them both aside and lit the fire herself. She was quite an adept at this sort of thing. For a wonder the chimney did not smoke, and the sight of crackling wood and cheerful blaze brought the first moment of comfort to poor Christian's heart. When the fire was lit the dirty table was laid with the plates and cups and saucers, and pewter spoons, and ugly black-handled knives. Judith thought they were very fine, but Christian, if she had not been acting a part, would have found it impossible to have eaten with them or on them.

But the tea was fairly good, and it was made in the tiny little brown teapot; and the herrings were put on the pan to fry. Mrs. Carter, attracted by the excellent smell, popped her nose in at the door.

"My word!" she said, "here's comfort; here's dainties; here's a real feast. Would a poor neighbor who has scarcely tasted a morsel all day be welcome, or would she be unwelcome? You say the word, miss—welcome or unwelcome—the truth, miss, and nothing but the truth."

Rosy gave Christian an anxious glance. Christian, still forcing herself to continue her play-acting, replied in a hearty tone:

"Of course you are welcome."

"Then do, like a good creature," suddenly exclaimed Judith, who by no means wished the feast to be shared by anyone else, "go and take out those curlers. Oh, I know they are Hinde's, but take 'em out—take 'em out—and come in looking like a decent, civilized 'uman being."

Mrs. Carter hastened to comply, and soon the four, on two chairs, were seated round the board. Rosy shared half of Christian's chair, and Judith and Mrs. Carter, pushing each other violently from time to time, subsided on the other. It cracked under their joint weight. Mrs. Carter said that if they were unlucky enough to break it, the landlord would charge Christian the full price of a new chair.

"He'd do nothing of the sort," said Judith. "Why should he, I should like to know? This one is as old as the hills, and didn't cost more than one and elevenpence when it was new."

She had scarcely uttered the words when crash, crack went the chair, and the two were prostrated on the ground.

They got up amidst peals of laughter. Mrs. Carter assured Christian that the chair cost seven and sixpence, but that she'd make it good with the landlord for half-a-crown if Christian would entrust her with that sum.

"We'll see about it to-morrow," said Rosy. "I think, ma'am, we have all had our meal, and there's a deal for me and this young—person," she glancing at Christian as she spoke—"to see to. We has to begin our trade to-morrow morning. We are poor—very poor."

"Oh, my!" said Mrs. Carter.

She glanced at Judith, who winked back at her.

"Yes, desperate," continued Rosy. "Aint we, Miss Christian?"

"Certainly we're very poor," replied Christian.

"But, all the same," continued Rosy, "we're very happy; aint we, missy?"

"Very," said Christian again. "And we are so thankful to our kind friends who helped us to run away. We are——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Mrs. Carter. "To think as you like this better nor the palaces you have come from."

"We are very happy, and there is such a thing as drudgery even in a palace," continued Rosy. "And this young—person—she don't call herself a lady any more—was going to a sort of prison school. She prefers liberty, even though liberty aint, so to speak, self-indulgence. We're both happy; aint we, Miss Christian?"

"Very happy," replied Christian.

"And how do you mean to live?" said Mrs. Carter, impressed in spite of herself.

"We thought of going and dancing in the streets. This young person can dance most beautifully."

"Well, I never! You'll make up as Italians, no doubt."

"It's you that has an acute brain, ma'am," said Rosy in a voice full of admiration. "That's what we mean to do—aint it, miss?"

"It is," said Christian.

"And we mean to begin," continued Rose, "to-morrow morning."

"Oh, no, you don't!" said Mrs. Carter. "That would be dangerous."

"Dangerous or not, we are going to risk it," said Rosy.

"Yes, we're going to risk it," said Christian in a stout voice.

"And what I was thinking," continued Rosy—"that is, if it is agreeable to you, Christian—is that every day, while we are out earning our fortunes, we might give Mrs. Carter, say, fourpence a day to keep our fire in and our room tidy, and perhaps to have the kettle boiling for us when we come in at night. If you like, Mrs. Carter, I think Christian and me would make it worth your while for fourpence a day."

"I'm agreeable to that same, if you make it sixpence."

"No, ma'am, we can't possibly do that. Fourpence is too high. If you don't like it, ma'am, say so, and we'll get a woman downstairs to do it for threepence, or maybe twopence."

"Well, I'll do it for fourpence if you throw supper into the bargain."

"Can we throw in supper, Miss Christian?" asked Rosy.

"I think so," said Christian, trying to act the part more forcibly than ever.

"Fourpence and supper, then," said Rose. "But it can't be paid any day that you don't make yourself useful, Mrs. Carter."

"No fear of me," said Mrs. Carter, with a toss of her head.

"And what part shall I have?" said Judith, who was absolutely taken in by Rose's cheerfulness.

"You can come and see us when you like, and when we have made enough money we'll now and then give you a treat; and Mrs. Carter shall come with us. But," added the little girl, emboldened by the effect her words were producing, "we won't have any of the other people of this house. The more you keep us to ourselves, Mrs. Carter, the more you will get. Do you understand?"

"For certain I do, honey; and I must say it's a real sensible plan."

"So we will stay here quietly to-night," said Rosy, "and enjoy ourselves, and to-morrow morning we will go and buy what we want. We'll start our trade about midday. We'll dress as Italians, of course."

"I'd like fine to see you doing it," said Mrs. Carter.

"You mustn't follow us on any account—anyhow, not for a day or two. We'd feel more nervous, like, if we thought you was looking on at us."

"You be a 'cute un," said Mrs. Carter.

"Now then, make yourself scarce, ma'am," said Judith, "for we have a lot to attend to."

Mrs. Carter retired. She was apparently in the height of good-humor. Rose instructed Christian how to wash up the tea-things.

By and by Judith also took her leave.

"For if I'm not back home before four o'clock, folks may suspect and hunt me up, and maybe find you into the bargain," she said to the little girls, and so she left them to themselves.

Yes, at last they were alone. Mrs. Carter had gone out; they heard her heavy tramp as she went downstairs. She was the only other lodger on this floor, and the place was now comparatively quiet.

"If only we could lock the door," said Rosy. "But there, we can't."

"Shall you sleep at all to-night, Rosy? Aren't you terrified?" said Christian.

"It's just this," said Rosy: "I mustn't let out; I must pretend I'm not the least bit frightened."

"I don't suppose you are. You are wonderfully brave."

"Now then, let us settle down and let us plan," said Rose.

They sat close to each other and kept up the fire, and they had no idea of saving their small amount of coal. What did it matter when they meant to go away on the morrow?

Presently day faded. They had forgotten to supply themselves with candles. Rose did not dare to go out. Christian clung to her.

"We'll keep up the fire all night," said Rose. "You'd like another cup of tea, wouldn't you, darling Miss Christian?"

"No," said Christian; "I'm not hungry. Rosy, if I hadn't done it I'd have been nearly at school now."

"Yes, darling."

"And I wouldn't be feeling such an awfully wicked girl."

"You can't help it," said Rosy. "It's the way of life; we are punished when we do wrong."

"Do you think we did very wrong?"

"For certain we did. I knew it all along, but I couldn't hold back from the fun."

"Do you think we are in danger now, Rosy?"

Rose was silent.

"Rosy, do you think anything will happen to us to-night?"

"Miss Christian, you always were brave."

"Yes," replied Christian, "but I never did suppose that I could be in my present surroundings. I am frightened to-night, and I don't pretend I am anything else."

"We will do what we said," answered Rose. "We'll put the chest of drawers against the door, and move the bedstead against the chest of drawers, and that will fill up the space as far as the opposite wall. Then no one can get in. Isn't that a good plan?"

"Let's do it," said Christian; "and let's do it now while Mrs. Carter is out, for if they heard us moving about the room they might try to get in."

"Come along, then, Miss Christian. Let's be quick. We never did a bit of play-acting to equal this before."

"Never," replied Christian; "and," she added under her breath, "I don't think I will ever, as long as I live, want to play-act again."

CHAPTER IX

A NIGHT IN THE SLUMS

THE two girls carried out their plan in all its details. They moved the chest of drawers against the door, and then they moved the bedstead. By this means they had practically locked the door. They were very thankful for this later on, for as night advanced and the people came home, and the house became full, their terrors increased. They were now so frightened that they did not dare to speak even to each other about their fears; and when, shortly after they had secured themselves against intrusion, someone first tapped at the door and then turned the handle and pushed, and then after a moment of silence steps were heard going away, they could only clasp each other's hands and sit close together, almost paralyzed with terror.

"They've shut themselves in," Christian heard Mrs. Carter say to someone on the landing. "They're the 'cutest young folks I ever see'd."

Then the someone who was spoken to growled, and Mrs. Carter and this person went into the adjoining room; and there they moved about at intervals, and at intervals remained quiet. Christian felt positive that they were waiting to do something, and Rose knew that they were waiting, but neither girl expressed her terror to the other.

"They can only get in by breaking through the door," said Christian, "and they will scarcely do that."

But Rose knew that such people as Mrs. Carter and her husband would think very little of breaking through an old door if they wished to get at their neighbors' attic.

How glad the children were that they had fuel! They piled up the little grate and made the fire burn hot and strong; and by and by Rosy tried to persuade Christian to have another cup of tea. But Christian was now so sick with terror that she could not touch the tea.

"We won't lie down at all," said Rosy. "We'll sit close to each other by the fire. We won't sit on the floor, for it aint too clean, but we'll sit on a chair each, and put our arms round each other. It's only for one night, my own darling Miss Christian—only for one night—and I think somehow God will keep us safe."

"I haven't prayed to Him," said Christian in a broken voice, "because I have done wrong. When you do very wrong you can't pray."

"Maybe you could repent, and then you could pray," said Rosy.

"I don't know," answered Christian.

The night went on. There were stars in the sky. The children could see the stars from the dormer-window of their attic; and presently the moon—a full one—rose and flooded the outside world. Christian, from where she sat, could see the cats stealing about, making great shadows on the neighboring roofs, and she could hear their cry as they met each other; she could also hear, far down below, the great roar of London itself. And in the house she could hear the cries of children and the angry, excited words of men and women, and she felt that in all her life she had never even imagined anything quite so awful. Her one drop of comfort lay in the fact that Rosy—pretty Rosy—was cuddled up close to her, and that Rosy certainly would not leave her.

The two young girls did not attempt to undress, and Christian's bag of money was still firmly secured under her skirt.

By and by silence began to reign. Even in a house like this people must sleep sometimes, and the drunken men and women lay down on their respective beds, the children slept heavily, and in the adjoining attic all was still. Then Rosy began to nod and to fall half-forward in her chair. Christian had great work to keep her from sliding to the ground. Perhaps it was this fact that made Christian so wide awake herself; but certain it is she could not sleep.

She was glad that there was a moon in the sky; she was glad that the terrible house was quiet at last. Poor Christian! she little knew what lay before her.

The time passed on, and notwithstanding her determination not to close an eye, the silence and the soothing effect of Rosy's presence began to make her drowsy. She put her arm more firmly round her little companion and let her body lean against Rosy's, and was really beginning to nod her head, when suddenly there came a great shadow between her and the moonlight. She looked up, and there was Mrs. Carter on the roof, trying to get in at the window. How she had got out on the leads Christian never knew, but she had done so, and was now feeling all along the fastening of the dormer-window and was endeavoring to open it.

In one minute it seemed to the young girl that the blood of Joan of Arc and Charlotte Corday, and many more of the great heroines of the past, rushed through her veins. She gave Rosy a jerk—unintentionally, for she did not mean to wake her. She did not care about Rosy then, nor did she want her. She felt all-sufficient to herself. In an instant she had sprung forward, and going to the window, opened it a little way.

"Go back this minute," she said. "You are not on any account to come in; I will push you down if you try. I don't care whether I hurt you or not; I will push you off the roof if you try to get in. You have no right here; go back."

Mrs. Carter was so amazed by the mere fact of Christian's being up and awake, when she expected her to be in bed and sound asleep, and so startled at the girl's unlooked-for courage, that she was absolutely mute.

"Go away," repeated Christian. "I know what you have come about: you want to steal my money. You think I have got some. Well, if I have, it isn't for you. You told me lies to-day about being punished for running away, but I don't tell you any lie when I say that you can be put in prison for this—yes, you and your husband. I will push you right down off the roof—I don't care whether it hurts or not—if you try to get in."

There was a very ugly look on Mrs. Carter's face. Even in the shadow, with her back to the moonlight, Christian noticed it; but not a single word escaped her lips. Her footing was insecure and dangerous; one strong push from a big girl like Christian standing firmly within the room would not only knock her down, but cause her to drop a matter of thirty feet on to another roof at a little distance. She therefore began cautiously and quietly, and still with that evil look on her face, to back away from Christian, and in a few minutes the young girl perceived by the absence of all shadow that Mrs. Carter must have returned to her own attic.

Then Christian shut the window, fastened it firmly, and stood close to it. Mr. Carter might come now that his wife had failed, but if he did both Christian and Rose would fight him. Christian was certain that between them they would be a match for anyone who tried to get in at the window.

"Rose," said Christian.

Rose began to mutter in her sleep. She had fallen forward now, and was half on the chair and half on the floor.

"I did not mean it, great-aunt," she began. "It was just that I were tempted, and I never, never thought that Miss Christian——"

"Wake up, Rose," said Christian; "wake up. You have got to stay awake."

Then Rose did open her dazed eyes.

"Whatever is the matter?" she cried.

"Build up the fire and I'll tell you," said Christian.

There was a new tone in Christian's voice; it was firm and strong and almost triumphant. It had the conquering note in it which Rosy had noticed when they played games sometimes in the attic.

"Oh, Miss Christian," she said, "what is it?"

Christian told her what had occurred.

"I am not proud," said Christian, "not a bit. It was just given to me to say the words, and I am sure God was helping me. I am sure God is sorry for us, and He is going to help us both. I don't feel a bit frightened, but we must keep them out, Rosy. If two of them come together it will be hard work, but we must be strong and firm and push them over if they try to come in. We will stay by the window all night, and you shall stay near to me, and we won't leave it except to stir up the fire."

The rest of the night was spent in that fashion, and as the hours went by and the moon set and darkness really came on, Rosy's fears began to return to her very badly; but Christian was not at all afraid.

"We will keep them out," she said. "If they had been coming back they would have come by now. And even if they do come back they will find us here."

Perhaps Mr. and Mrs. Carter were not quite such valiant people as Mrs. Carter would have given the children to understand, for certain it is that, although Christian fancied she heard a step on the roof outside the window towards morning, it did not come any nearer. Perhaps

Carter was only prowling round to see if the children were still up and awake.

When the morning dawned there were two very tired little faces gazing sadly each at the other.

"This is the longest night I have ever lived through," said Christian, "and yesterday was the longest day. There is only one thing now to be done: I will go back to nursey and Miss Thompson and Miss Neil, and tell them everything. I will write to father and mother. I have done dreadfully wrong, and I ought to be punished, and I am quite, quite willing to go to the strict-discipline school."

"That's all very well," cried Rose. "but what about me?"

The terrors of the night were over, and once again she began to feel a certain charm in a life of independence; the little attic, with the winter sunshine streaming in at the dormer-window, was not altogether despicable; and surely there was a great fascination in the thought of dancing and playing and taking a monkey round the London streets.

"You did wrong too, Rose," said Christian. "Of course, you wouldn't have done it but for me. I will stand up for you all I can. I will tell your mother myself. She'll be angry, of course, but she wouldn't be a true mother if she didn't forgive."

"Oh, Miss Christian! you don't know what it means. If you only would——"

Then she looked at Christian's face and changed her mind. It was useless to talk any further; Christian was resolved. She had been resolved to run away, and she had done so; she was now equally resolved to return to the straight paths.

"I tell you what it is, Miss Christian," said Rose; "if you'd only speak to great-aunt, and ask her to let me live with her until you come back again, I'd be as happy as the day is long. You'll ask her, miss, won't you?"

"Perhaps," said Christian; "but it is time we were off, and we are not going to pretend any more."

Rosy had made tea, and Christian drank a cup and ate a morsel of bread; and then they pulled the bedstead away from its place beside the door, pushed the chest of drawers aside, and prepared to leave the attic. But first Christian took half-a-crown from her pocket.

"Whatever's that for?" asked Rosy.

"It's for the chair that Judith and Mrs. Carter broke," said Christian.

She had scarcely said the words before Mrs. Carter, with a pretended smile on her face and her hair quite tidily arranged, opened the door of her attic and came out.

"Well, now, dearies," she said, "and how are you both? And how did you sleep?"

Christian looked at her in some wonder. Mrs. Carter did not even blush.

"Why, now," she said, "the way poor women are misunderstood! You fastened your door, timorous young things, supposing as the neighbors might be breaking into your room and getting your bits of gold. You had no cause to fear that with me a-sleeping on the same floor; you had but to shout to me and I'd have come to you, and there aint a neighbor in the house as would do anything to little gels when Martha Carter's blood is up. Well, you shut your door, but I couldn't sleep. I said to Willyum, 'Willyum,' I sez, 'I can't get any rest for thinking of those two poor little haristocrats next door. They don't trust us, Willyum,' sez I, 'and I'll open the winder and steal out on the leads and look in at 'em, just to see that they're cozy and fast asleep.'

"'Do,' sez Willyum; and I gets out, and, my word! I was took back. You turned into a young savage, miss, and you threatened to murder me, and I as good-natured a woman as ever walked.

" Back I goes to Willyum. ' They're young sparrer-haws,' sez I, ' and we'll leave 'em to 'emselves. I'll have no more dealing with 'em. I never was took up with haristocrats, and these are the worst of their species.'

" Willyum agrees with me, and we drop asleep. Well, miss, I meant no harm; you mistook me — that was all."

Christian's clear eyes fixed themselves steadily on Mrs. Carter's bad face; then she said in a gentle tone:

" We are going away. We don't like this house, and we are going. You can do what you like with the crockery and the frying-pan and the coals, and you can have that half-crown in order to get the broken chair mended. And I paid for this room for a week, and you can use it until the week is up. Good-by; we are going. Don't keep us. If you or your husband follow us I shall scream for the police, and I shall tell the whole truth about everything. You'd best not follow us. Come, Rose."

She took her little companion's hand, and they ran downstairs.

As they ran the neighbors on each floor peeped out to watch them, and one or two made as though to follow them; but somehow they stopped short, for there was an expression on Christian's face which seemed to daunt them. She was walking very upright, and there was not a scrap of fear about her. Rosy, who stepped by her side, looked altogether small and insignificant by comparison.

" My word! " said Mrs. Carter, who came downstairs behind the children, turning as she spoke to address a slatternly woman who had come out of her room to see the sport, as she expressed it—" my word! that eldest girl, she'll do what she said. She's a character, she be. Why, if you'll believe it, last night, when I stood by the winder as kind as kind can be, just to see if the pore little dears were sleeping sound, she threatened to murder me, she did—no less. They're a good riddance, they be, and I'm going to see the landlord about that bit of a room. Pore man, I don't think he'll ever see his rent."

"See his rent!" screamed Mrs. Peters, the woman who had been spoken to. "You know as well as I do that it was paid in full by that queer girl what came here yesterday. If there are any spoils in that there room, we'll share with you, Mrs. Carter."

The excitement which this remark caused was really good for the children, for it so distracted Mrs. Carter's attention, and so fierce was the quarreling which ensued, that they were absolutely forgotten. They walked on silently for some little time. Rosy's heart beat hard, but Christian felt herself more like Joan of Arc than ever.

"We must try and get home," she said. "We have plenty of money, and I shall ask the police the best way to Russell Square."

Rose clutched her hand.

"Don't, Christian, don't!" she cried. "You mustn't. I don't care; I am frightened. That story may be true or it mayn't. S'pose it is true; s'pose they're angry; and—Oh, dear! oh, dear! Look, Christian—look!"

She pulled Christian forward. They were just passing a police-station, and there, pasted to the walls of the front of the house in very large letters, was an exact description of themselves:

"MISSING.—A tall girl of about thirteen, with long, fair hair; and a shorter girl with dark, curly hair."

A long description followed, giving, item for item, all particulars with regard to the children. The tall girl wore a dark-blue serge dress and jacket, and the small girl was in red. A "substantial reward" was offered for the recovery of these two girls.

When Christian read this very startling description she felt the courage oozing out of her finger-tips.

"I suppose that awful woman is right. She must be right when the police are looking for us. This notice is outside a police-station. What is to be done?"

As Christian spoke she held Rosy's arm more firmly than ever. The two girls stood opposite the police-station, and once again Christian read the words of the advertisement. As she did so a stoutly built man of the laboring type came up.

He read the advertisement, and then he glanced at the two girls. Once again he read, and once again he looked. Christian was so absorbed in the description of herself that she did not notice the man; but Rose saw him.

"Is there anything I can do for you, lydies? If so I'll be pleased," he remarked suddenly.

Christian replied eagerly, "Do you know your way to Russell Square? It's a big square in Bloomsbury. Can you tell me how to get there?"

"Bloomsbury," said the man, scratching his forehead. "Never heard tell of it. Is it far from Lunnon, lydy?"

"No," replied Christian; "it's a place in London, and we want to get there as soon as possible."

"I daren't go home," whispered Rosy. "You know, Christian—you must know what it means."

Christian took her hand. "Come on," she said firmly; "we're all right. If we can get home without the police finding us, do you think that my dear nursey or Miss Thompson will lock us up? The thing is to get back to Russell Square and tell everything, and then we shall be all right."

"I'm willin' to go with you, lydies," said the man. "I know my way all right about this part of Lunnon, which aint, so to speak, a respectable part; and when we get to the neighborhood of the houses where the gentry lives, it's but to ask my way and I'll be told. I'm willin' and anxious to oblige you two lydies. Oh, I know I be a son o' toil, but I may say I'm honest. You may trust me—that you may."

Just then two policemen came out of the station; they stood on the steps and talked to each other. Presently one of them fixed his eyes on Christian. Her appearance evidently interested him, and he spoke to the other in a low voice. This decided the young girl.

"We'll go with you," she said to the man; "only you must be very quick. We want to get to Russell Square early this morning."

"Right you are, lydy," said the man, and he stepped on in front.

The two girls followed him. They walked in this fashion for the greater part of a mile, and all the wonderful dreams that Christian had ever dreamt about the happy life which she and Rosy would spend together disappeared as though they had never existed. She saw herself at last as she was—a very naughty, discontented little runaway girl. She had done nothing great or noble; on the contrary, she had been fearfully disobedient, and had doubtless given intense trouble to those who loved her. She to dare to compare herself to Joan of Arc or Charlotte Corday! She writhed now as she saw herself in her true colors. There was only one thing she was thankful for, and that was for the fact that her father and mother were out of England.

"They at least do not know what I have done," she thought; "and by the time they do know, they will have got my letter, and I'll have told them—oh, yes, I'll have told them—how sorry I am."

Suddenly the man turned and faced the children.

"If you two lydies," he said, "aint hungry, I am. Aint you got any money about yer?"

"Oh, indeed we have," said Christian. "We can give you quite a nice meal if you wish for it."

"But we aint got too much," said Rosy. She nudged her companion and gave her a warning look.

"Here's a shop where they have prime vittles," said the man; and as he spoke he stopped before a common-looking eating-house and beckoned the children to follow him inside.

It didn't look nice, Christian thought; but then they were very hungry—in fact, they were half-starved. Never before in her whole life had Christian known what real, desperate hunger meant—for they had scarcely touched any food for the last twenty-four hours.

Within the shop was an appetizing smell of fried fish and baked potatoes, and there were long tables with marble tops, and plates and cups and saucers. Coffee, too, was smoking in a great urn. A woman with two tired little children came in and ordered cocoa, and the cocoa looked good and rich and steaming hot. Oh, yes, they did not mind how ugly the place was outside; within there was food, and they were so terribly hungry.

CHAPTER X

JUDITH FORD

Now, it so happened that while Christian and Rose were struggling to get back to their homes, Miss Neil, Miss Thompson, and poor nurse were nearly at their wits' ends.

When Miss Neil had missed Christian on the day before, she had rushed at once to the bookstall, for she knew that the young girl adored books, and she felt certain that she would find her there. But of course no Christian was to be found. The porters were asked, and even the stationmaster came out and a thorough and complete search was made; but by this time Christian herself was far away; as poor Miss Neil said, she had vanished like smoke off the face of the earth.

A truly terrible day followed. It was impossible to communicate with Mr. and Mrs. Mitford, and yet the child must be found without delay. By twelve o'clock the whole affair was put into the hands of the police. Rewards were offered, and advertisements were issued far and wide all over London. It was in consequence of this fact that poor Christian was so terrified by the advertisement at the police-station.

These advertisements were got ready very quickly, and it so happened that late on the evening of the very day when Christian had disappeared Judith Ford saw one of them. Judith read it with great interest, and as she did so a pleased sensation crept round her heart. She was the sort of girl to do nothing except with an eye to the main chance. It was entirely because she hoped to make money that she had helped Christian and Rose. Now it suddenly occurred to her that perhaps, after all, it might be her best plan to try to obtain "the substantial reward" which was offered to anyone who would find the missing children. Although she had fully intended to possess herself of the greater part of Christian's little purse, yet this might mean a still more profitable transaction. She therefore made up her mind to go that very night to Russell Square and tell Miss Thompson and the nurse where the children were to be found.

But when Judith reached her mother's house she came into the midst of a family catastrophe. One of her brothers had been badly hurt in a fall from a ladder. He happened to be Judith's favorite brother, and even she forgot her avarice in the agony she experienced when she saw him lying insensible and evidently in danger.

But when by and by the boy was removed to the hospital, and quiet reigned once again in the family, Judith remembered the advertisement and what it might mean for her. It was too late that night to go to see Miss Thompson, but early the next morning—soon after eight o'clock—a stoutly built girl might have been seen mounting the steps of the great house in Russell Square.

"I am Judith Ford," she said to the butler, "and I want a lydy of the name of Thompson. You stir yourself now and bring her down to me. You think nought of me, no doubt, but I've got that which you'd give your eyes for. Hurry up and get the lydy down, for I'm the person she's a-wanting to see."

The butler looked indignant, but as Judith did not mind this in the least, and as her face expressed a good deal of resolution, and wore also a most knowing air, he decided to admit her.

Whatever he said to Miss Thompson brought that lady, and also nurse, down very quickly.

"I know where the two children are," said Judith. "I know it for the best of good reasons, because I was with 'em, poor dears! I warned 'em all I could not to do it, but they wouldn't listen to me. They're in quite a respectable place, and I meant to come straight and tell you last night, but my brother Joe nearly died from a fall from a ladder. I can take you to the children, and I will. What is the money you are going to give me? I want a good lot. No one else can find them, but I can."

"We'll give you five pounds," said Miss Thompson. "Be quick; there isn't an instant to lose. Judson, please call a four-wheeler."

But Judith planted her feet firmly on the rug.

"'Taint to be done," she said. "I won't go for no five pounds. I want ten—not a penny less. Why, I could get more than that from Miss Christian; aint she got it in a little bag under her skirt?"

"Oh, the darling!" cried nurse, nearly bursting into tears. "And didn't I make the bag, and tell her how to wear it, and——"

"Most like there aint much of the money left by now," said Judith. "It wasn't my fault as your Miss Christian ran away. I got 'em both into a respectable room, and I meant to help 'em. But you have offered a 'substantial reward,' and a substantial reward means ten pounds or it means nothing at all. Is it yes or no?"

"It's yes, of course," said Miss Thompson. "Nurse, not a word; the child must be found. Judson, call a cab; and you must come with us. You will sit on the box, Judson."

Judith smiled grimly. She was having things pretty much her own way. Really this adventure was turning out well.

Soon nurse and Miss Thompson were seated in a four-wheeler. Judith faced them, and Judson took his place on the box with all the dignity he could muster. Judith now enjoyed herself vastly.

"Look slippy," she said to the cabby; "I'll tell yer where to go. Drive first to Paddington Station, and then take the first turning to the left, then the second to right then first to left again. You'll find yourself in a low part, but never you mind that. When you get to the fifth turn to the left you stop, and I'll get on the box and order you where to go. Oh, yes, there'll be room for me, as well as his lordship the butler. Now then, hurry up."

The cabman whipped up his horse, and the cab was jolted forward. Miss Thompson, in her agony of mind, clutched nurse's hand.

By and by they reached Paddington Station, and the cabman took the turns that Judith indicated. Judith herself now sat with her head and half of her body out of the window, shouting directions. At last the cab drew up.

"I can't go any farther," said the cabby, looking round at Judith.

"Frightened, be yer?" said that young woman. "Now, then, lydies, you keep quiet. We be going into rough places, but never mind; *I'll* be on the box."

She scrambled up and squeezed herself between Judson and the cabby. Judson had never felt so insulted in his life, but Judith did not mind that.

"Turn to your right," she cried to the cabman. "Now to the left; now down that street. A bit bobby, are yer? No call to be. You look slippy! You're a bit of a soft, aint yer, cabby?"

The cabman chaffed Judith, and Judith chaffed him back. Judson, with his arms folded, sat as though he were a statue.

By and by they stopped at a street which led into a court called Paradise Court. It was in this awful court that the poor children had spent the night. Judith now sprang from the box and opened the door.

"Out you get, lydies," she said. "The butler can walk behind."

She swept her hand towards Judson as she spoke.

"You and me," she continued, turning to Miss Thompson, "and t'old nurse can keep together in front. We'll keep nurse atween us, being the most ancient of the party. There aint nought to fear. This night will have done 'em both a sight of good. They want to be shown how wicked they was when they left their comferable homes."

By and by the little party reached the house where the children had lodged, and very slowly they went upstairs. They reached the top landing, and here Judith with a vigorous kick pushed Christian's room door open. The sight within was not calculated to reassure either nurse or Miss Thompson. For Mrs. Carter and Mrs. Peters from below-stairs had evidently come to an amicable arrangement, and were now finishing the provisions left in the attic by the two children. Furthermore, the half-crown which Christian had laid on the table had been expended on beer and sausages. The sausages were frying on the fire, and the kettle was boiling.

Nothing could exceed the horror of this scene to poor Miss Thompson. As to nurse, she was now so fearfully anxious about Christian that she had no time to be alarmed or shocked on any other count.

"Where is my child—my darling?" she cried. "Where have you hidden her? Oh, you bad women, what have you done with my pet? Tell me at once."

"Highty-tighty!" cried Mrs. Carter, jumping to her feet and putting her arms akimbo; "and who may you be?"

"You know who I am, at any rate," said Judith. "And, let me tell you, this is my room, for I paid for it with money of the realm. So out of it you go. Where have you put those young lydies? These two lydies have come along for 'em, and they're going to pay me well—and better than well—so you must bring 'em out from where you have hidden 'em. Where are they?"

"Sakes!" cried Mrs. Carter, who had not recognized Judith at first, and now thought it best to humor her, "there's no need to get into a fluster. The young uns have gone. Notwithstanding the rare kindness with which they was treated, they walked out nearly an hour and a half ago; and where they are now dear only knows, for I don't."

Judith asked a few more pertinent questions; then she turned to Miss Thompson. Her face looked decidedly frightened.

"We've got to follow 'em," she said. "Of course, we'll soon overtake 'em. Let's go back to the cab, and be quick."

They went downstairs. Miss Thompson described her feelings afterwards as those of a person who was stunned.

"I could not have felt worse if I had heard that Christian was dead," she said; "and the awful thing was that her father and mother were away. If they had been at home I might have borne it."

Now, while these good people were searching high and low for the missing children, the children themselves were having a very bad time. How it happened they did not know, but when they had finished their meal—their warm and delicious meal of fried fish and fried potatoes and hot, strong, sweet cocoa—they became wonderfully sleepy—so sleepy that they could not keep their eyes open. And the man who had looked after them and ordered them food, and had really seemed quite attentive and kind, and, as Rosy expressed it, most respectable, suggested that they should stay just where they were and have "their little snooze out."

"You are fair done," he said. "I don't know what kind of a night you had, but hungrier children I never saw; and now, I may add, I never saw sleepier. You have your sleep out, and I'll come back in an hour or so. I'll go and have a smoke. It's early yet in the day, and we'll get to Bloomsbury and that big square you spoke of in less than no time; so have your sleep out now."

Christian said afterwards that of course she ought not to have yielded, but she really scarcely knew what she was doing; her head would fall forward and her eyes would close. Presently she found herself leaning against Rosy, and Rosy found herself leaning against Christian, and unconsciousness stole over them.

They never knew how long they slept, but when they did come to themselves, and Christian, rubbing her eyes, looked around her, and Rosy, sitting up, exclaimed "Oh, dear!" several times, they neither of them recognized their surroundings. For they were far away from the eating-house; they were in the open air, sitting side by side, two most desolate little objects, in the midst of a great builder's yard. They were leaning up against a huge building, and there were stacks and stacks of wood close to them, and the pleasant smell of newly sawn wood not far off. And there was the whir of a saw also in their ears. But how had they got there? And where was *there?* In what part of the whole wide world were they now?

"Oh, Rosy, what is it?" said Christian.

"I don't know," said Rosy.

"I wonder if we are dead and this is——"

"Oh, this aint heaven!" said Rosy. "I never felt more frightened in all my life. Where can we be?"

"Oh, dear! oh, dear! Can't you remember anything at all?" said Christian. "I had a dream," she continued, rubbing her eyes as she spoke. "I thought I was eating—oh, such good things!—and that, however much I ate, I was still hungry. And then I dreamt that I was sleepy, and I slept, and I wanted—oh, so badly!—to be back in my own little bed at home; but all the things I wanted I couldn't get. Oh, dear!" she added, with a bitter sigh, "I do remember now. We have run away from home. We were at an eating-house. There was a man, and he seemed quite respectable, and we fell asleep when we had eaten some good things—fried fish and potatoes. But how have we got here?"

Rosy's dark eyes opened wide. She suddenly fell on her knees by Christian's side and began to feel her.

"What are you doing now?" said Christian.

"Your pocket, Christian—the little pocket under your dress with the gold."

"Oh, that's all right," said Christian. "No one knows of that."

She started up, although she felt very faint and giddy. She began to feel under her dress. The next minute she uttered a cry.

"Oh, Rosy, it's gone! It's gone altogether. See! the string is cut," she added, lifting her skirt. "And I had two shillings in my upper pocket, and that is gone too. All our money, Rosy—it's all gone."

"Then I understand," said Rosy briskly. "It's bad, but it might be worse. We'll go straight home. We have been robbed. I don't know how they did it, but

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they have done it. We'll go straight home, and at once."

She had scarcely uttered the words before a good-natured-looking man of the working-class, but with a very different expression from that of the so-called respectable man, came towards them. He was holding a bulldog in leash; and the bulldog, suddenly catching sight of the children, strained to get near them and began to bark loudly.

"Hold that noise, Tiger," said the man; and then he came to the children and looked at them.

Notwithstanding their torn and draggled and tired appearance, neither Christian nor Rose looked like ordinary tramps. The man continued to gaze at them attentively.

"However did you get here?" he said.

"Please, sir," said Rose, "will you be kind to us? We are two most unhappy girls. We ran away from home yesterday, both of us—me from a very humble home, and Miss Christian Mitford from her grand one. We don't pretend that we are not the very worst young girls in the world, but we're *that* sorry, and we want to get back home again. We're so sorry that we can't even speak of it."

"And we've been robbed," said Christian. "I had over seven pounds when I left home, and it is gone. A man took it, I think, in an eating-house."

"Why, bless me!" said the man, "you must be the very children who are being advertised for all over London. Come, I'll see about this; I'll soon put the matter straight for you."

The man tried to take Christian's hand, but she moved away from him.

"I—I am frightened," she said. "Is it true—is it—that the police can lock us up?"

"Dear me!" said the man, with a laugh. "Whoever heard of such a thing? No; of course it isn't true. You trust me and I'll see you safe back to wherever you came from. Come along into the house. There's my mother; she and I always live in the yard, for it's wonderful how folks do manage to creep into a builder's yard and steal things. Come along, little ladies. She'll give you both a cup of tea. Oh, dear, this is a find!"

As the man spoke Christian lost all fear of him, and even Rose looked happy and comforted. So they followed him into a very little house, where an old woman was bustling about.

"Well, Albert," she said, at the sight of the tall man, "and what is the news now?"

"Rare good news for us, mother," was his answer. "Didn't I tell you that we'd just get that money in the nick of time? And here it is, mother. Here are the little hostages who will get us over our difficulty."

As he spoke he drew Christian and Rose forward.

"The missing children," he said. "And when you have given them a cup of hot tea each, and a bit of your celebrated hot toast, I'll take them home. Make the tea strong, mother, for it's my belief the poor creatures have been drugged."

CHAPTER XI

LITTLE PROVIDENCES

NEVER—never to their dying day—did Christian and Rose enjoy anything so much as their comfortable seat by the carpenter's fire, and the hot, strong tea which the carpenter's mother gave them. She informed them that her name was Morris, that her son was called John Morris, and that they were both thoroughly respectable.

"You have had such a queer adventure that maybe you won't know just for a bit who is respectable and who is not; but me and John is. Aren't we, John?"

"Strikes me you are about right, mother," said John Morris; and then he sat down and stared at the two children.

"It is too wonderful," he kept saying; and when he said this he began to ruffle up his thick hair and to rub his forehead.

"What is wonderful?" said Christian at last. "Do you greatly mind, Mrs. Morris? but if your son wouldn't stare so very hard, Rosy and I would like it better."

"Oh, 'taint at you he's looking," said Mrs. Morris. "Don't you fash yourself, my dear."

"But he is looking first at Rose and then at me," said Christian. "Aren't you, Morris?" she added, turning to the tall young man.

"Well, I be and I been't," was his reply. "I'm looking through you, miss, and that's the fact."

"Oh, dear!" said Christian; "I think that makes matters a little worse."

"Would you like to hear a bit of a story, my deary?" said Mrs. Morris, drawing her straw arm-chair close to the fire as she spoke. "You don't mind the children hearing it, do you, John, my son?"

"No, mother," was his answer. "You tell 'em just as much as you think fit."

"Well, loveys," said Mrs. Morris, "it was just like this. John and me, we owed a bit of money—exactly seven pounds ten—and we didn't know how on the wide earth to get it, and the man to whom we owed it was about to sell us up. He was going to put the brokers into this little bit of a house, my darlings."

"Who are they?" asked Christian.

"Men, lovey—cruel men. They come and take possession of your house, and you can't call even the bed you sleep on your own, to say nothing of your little frying-pan and china-lined saucepan. And when a day or two has gone by they sell everything and take away the money, and you are left without stick or stone belonging to you."

"That must be very awful. I never heard of anything quite so awful," said Christian; "and only for seven pounds ten."

"I've heard of it," said Rosy. "There's one thing about poor folks: they do hear of that sort of thing. It's very bad, Mrs. Morris," she continued.

"I think it is about the most cruel thing I ever heard of," said Christian. "Oh! if only my seven pounds weren't stolen you should have them all."

"Aint they dear children, both of 'em?" said Mrs. Morris, looking at her son, and the tears filled her eyes. "But, my darlings, maybe you'll be the means of giving us the money after all; for a reward is offered by your friends, loves, and if anybody earns that reward now it is my son John."

"If the little ladies are ready, perhaps we'd best be going," said John Morris.

"Oh, yes, we're quite ready," said Christian. "Hadn't we better have a cab? I feel rather tired," she added.

"We can't have it," said the man; "there aint any money to pay for it."

"But it can be paid for when we get home," said Christian.

"We won't risk it," said the man. "They may have left the house; there's no saying what might have happened. We've got to walk, misses."

"I'm so tired," said Christian again; but Rosy nudged her and said:

"Keep up your heart. You can rest as long as ever you like when you get home."

So they bade good-by to Mrs. Morris, and thanked her for her tea; and she kissed them and called them "little providences" and "little hostages to fortune," and smiled at them as they went out of the door, and looked so happy that it almost broke Christian's heart to see her.

"To be happy—oh, so happy!—in such a tiny, tiny house, and then to want just seven pounds ten, and because of the lack of so little, to have the terrible fear of her furniture being sold! Indeed it shall not be!" thought Christian; "I'll see to that."

But as she walked through the dirty, sloppy streets by John Morris's side she could not help wondering if she had any right to ask anything at all. For the thought of what she had done and the misery she had caused kept cropping up ever and ever before her mind, and with each thought her sin seemed to grow blacker, and her ingratitude to her parents greater.

"And they're not even at home," thought the young girl. "Oh, who will give the poor carpenter seven pounds ten?"

From the part of London where the children had been found to Russell Square was a long way, and soon Christian was so weary that she could scarcely drag herself along.

"There's no help for it," said the carpenter; "I'm a strong man and can carry you for a bit, missy. Come," he added; "put your arms round my neck. Now then."

Christian felt heartily ashamed of herself. A great girl to be carried through the streets of London! But oh, how weary she was! Her feet felt quite blistered, and the carpenter's arms were very strong, and he had such a kind face.

"Are you sure—quite sure—carpenter," she said after a pause, "that you will get that money? Are you certain that you will be rewarded—that the people who advertised will give you as much for finding us?"

"I guess that's about the sum," said Morris, and then he laughed.

What with one adventure and another, it was dark—quite dark—past six o'clock—before the runaways reached the old family house in Russell Square. Nurse and Miss Thompson had both returned. Judith, discomfited and miserable, had gone back to her mother's house. A tall policeman was standing in the hall, and Miss Neil, who had also come to the fore, was talking to him very earnestly. He was suggesting this thing and another, and as he suggested, and Miss Thompson's pale face looked up at him, and Miss Neil's rather indignant one was fixed on his face, and nurse wept in the background, there came a loud pealing ring at the front-door.

"To save my life I couldn't go to answer it," thought nurse to herself. "Something tells me as there is news, good or bad, and for the life of me I can't stir a step to meet it."

But Judson, his pride a good deal ruffled, was not far away, and he stalked to the front-door and flung it open.

Then there was a scream—which, on the part of Miss Neil, almost reached a shriek—for in the arms of a tall man was a big, fair-haired girl, and by his side stood a little, dark-haired girl, and the next instant all three were in the hall. Christian, when she saw the policeman, very nearly cried again; but the welcome the wanderers received must soon have reassured them. Miss Neil was the only one who even tried to look severe.

"Well, you have very nearly killed me," she said. "But there, there! thank God in heaven you are back. Miss Thompson, see the poor children. How frightfully tired they look! I have no doubt they have been in horrid, dirty, smelly places, and have brought back the most horrible complaints."

But Christian and Rose hardly heard the words, for the home feeling was so comfortable, and nurse's kisses, given indiscriminately first to her nursling and then to her great-niece, were too delicious for words,

It was Christian who first recovered herself. She heard someone talking in the hall, and looking up, she saw Morris, looking very upright and very respectable, on the mat. Now, no one had noticed Morris; and perhaps, being not at all an aggressive sort of man, he might have gone away from the house without any reward but for Christian. The look on his face brought her quickly to herself.

"Miss Thompson," she said, "Miss Neil," she stood between the two in the hall, "I don't pretend that I haven't been a very naughty girl. I am sorry, although that doesn't mend matters; but neither Rosy nor I would perhaps have ever got back home at all if it had not been for this man. His name is Morris—John Morris—and he lives in a timber-yard, a very nice place indeed. And he and his mother have a little house there, and they're in great trouble because of seven pounds ten. Please, I want him to have seven pounds ten at once for finding us."

"You did mention, ma'am," said Morris, touching his forehead with great punctiliousness, "or at least the parties who put up the advertisement mentioned, that the reward for them as found the little ladies would be substantial."

"It was I who put those words," said Miss Neil. "I regretted having to do so, but there was no way out."

"My mother and me, we do want money," said Morris, "or I wouldn't make so bold as to ask for it, for it's real happiness to have brought the little ladies home."

"Very naughty children they are," said Miss Neil; "but of course we must keep our word. How much, Miss Thompson, ought we to give this man?"

"Seven pounds ten at the very least," cried Christian.

"Hush, Christian! you certainly have no voice in the matter."

"We promised that bold girl, Judith Ford, ten pounds," said Miss Thompson.

"That is quite true; and this man——"

"Oh, he was so kind!" said Christian. "He carried me when I nearly fainted from tiredness; and he and his mother gave us such delicious tea. Didn't they, Rosy?"

"That they did," said Rosy. "I haven't never took such a fancy to anything as I did to that hot buttered toast," she added.

Morris smiled and his dark eyes twinkled.

"You must come another day, missy, and see my mother," was his answer.

"But now let us consider the reward," said Miss Thompson.

"It certainly can't be less than ten pounds; and I should say," remarked Miss Neil suddenly, "that seeing everything, and also having an eye to the fact that we were about to offer a very much larger sum, we ought to give this good man fifteen pounds."

"Miss Neil!" almost screamed Christian. "Oh, I'll never think you hard or old-maidish again!"

She ran forward and caught Miss Neil by the arm.

"At present, my dear," said that good lady, eyeing her with marked disapproval, "we will have done with heroics. We will attend to business. Perhaps, sir, you will step into the study. Judson, show this man into the study; we will go there and give him the money."

So Morris, hardly knowing whether he was standing on his head or his heels, went home that night with fifteen pounds in his pocket.

"Mother," he said as, an hour later, he entered the very humble little home, "it wasn't only that they were providences, those two dear little ladies, but they have set us up for life. I can now get that machine I have always been hankering after, and so add a lot to my weekly earnings."

"And what a good thing you did find the poor little dears!" said Mrs. Morris. "I am just going out now to get some sausages, for you haven't had what may be called a meal for some little time, John."

So John and Mrs. Morris were helped, and as far as they were concerned, Christian's mad adventure seemed to have borne good fruit.

To Christian herself, after Morris went, no one said a harsh word; but Miss Neil sat down and began to write a long letter, which was to reach the girl's parents in Bombay. Occasionally as she wrote she put up her handkerchief to her eyes to wipe away some fast-falling tears; for she was not all hard, as Christian had supposed, and she had really suffered horribly for the last two days.

Rose, having been regaled with an excellent meal, was taken home by nurse herself. Mrs. Latimer received her little girl with scant favor.

"A fine mess you have got into!" she said.

"Don't scold her, poor child!" said nurse. "I am going, if I possibly can, to have her to live with me in the coming winter. She did what she did because she's so took up with Miss Christian; and, bad as the whole affair was, it was a blessed thing for Miss Christian that she had Rosy with her."

"Then if you are going to look after Rose, aunt," said Mrs. Latimer, "she needn't go on learning the dressmaking."

"No, that she needn't, for I'm going to train her to be a proper lady's-maid. Miss Christian will want someone whom she can really trust when she is grown up. You must remember, Mary, that our Miss Christian is the daughter of very rich people, and very important people too, and will be quite a great lady in her own way by and by."

So Rose's home-coming was not nearly so bad as she she had feared, for her mother was not going to be too cross with a little girl whom her aunt was, to all practical purposes, going to adopt.

"Sit down, child," she said; "or, if you have had enough to eat, do for goodness' sake take yourself off to bed. You look half-dazed."

"That's about true, mother," said Rosy.

In Christian's room a bright fire was blazing, and nurse herself, the moment she came back, began to attend to her nursling.

"To think of where we slept last night," mused Christian.

But if her thoughts were back in that short and dreadful experience, she could not bring herself to speak of it for to-night at least, and nurse did not speak of it either. She went on just as though nothing had happened. But when the young girl was warm and snug in bed, and the dreadful past seemed wonderfully like a dream, nurse sank down by the bedside, stretched out her arms over the coverlet, laid her head down on them, and burst into tears.

"Miss Christian," she whispered, "for all the rest of my life I will believe in God Almighty and in the power of prayer. For I did pray so terribly hard; and now, see, God has answered me."

"Yes," said Christian; but she did not say any more.

That night she slept soundly. She did not guess that nurse had dragged a little sofa-bed into the room and was lying down near her; she was too weary to know anything.

In the morning she awoke, and the dream-feeling of the past grew greater and greater. She got up slowly and went into the schoolroom. How strange the house seemed! Just the old house, with all the old furniture, and the same servants, and nurse there and all; and yet her father and mother away, and she herself having no right to be there.

At about eleven o'clock Miss Neil bustled into the room.

"Christian," she said, "you have been, from what I hear, in a very unhealthy and dangerous place, and you may have contracted some illness while there. That being the case, Miss Peacock does not wish you to go to school for at least ten days. During that time you will stay with nurse and Miss Thompson, and the doctor, whom I have sent for, will call to see you once or twice. When you are pronounced absolutely free of all danger of infection I will take you to Penwerne. But for the next ten days you will consider yourself free. You will have holidays, and Miss Thompson will take you where she likes. Now, my dear, I am off, and I can only say I am glad your mad escapade has not ended in anything worse."

Christian tried to speak, but Miss Neil did not give her any time; she whisked out of the room and went downstairs.

"I have told her, Miss Thompson," she said to the governess, who was waiting for her in the hall. "I don't suppose she has caught anything, but it will serve her right if she has. Anyhow, it is only fair to the school that it should not be endangered by such a naughty girl."

"And we may do what we like for the next ten days?" said Miss Thompson.

"Anything; only don't bother me."

"We won't indeed."

"I will send in a doctor to see her. She looks perfectly well, only a little pale. Yes, amuse her; do what you please. It is not my place to punish her. Thank Heaven she is not my child!"

CHAPTER XII

GOING TO SCHOOL

NOTWITHSTANDING all that went before, Christian enjoyed her ten days. She knew she ought not to feel happy, but nevertheless happiness would nestle up close to her. She was not troubled; she was calm. She felt that, naughty as she had been, God had forgiven her. During those ten days Christian was very gentle in her manners. She had a sensation in her heart that she could never be naughty again. She was so impressed by this feeling that, the night before she left for Cornwall, she said to nurse:

"Nursey, darling, I suppose all things are for the best. I feel that I am a much wiser girl than I should have been if I had gone to Cornwall that time when father and mother left."

"What do you mean, lovey?" replied the old nurse.

"Well, you see, I have been quite bad, and I have had great terrors, and I have lived through the sort of things that open your eyes, and I see now that I was a selfish girl, and naughty and deceitful, and not a bit of a heroine; but since I came back I have vowed that I will never be naughty again, and I don't mean to be."

"To be sure, dear," said nurse gently. "It's all very fine to promise that to yourself, isn't it, but how do you think you will keep it up?"

"Simply by not yielding to temptation. You know I have a passionate nature, and I have lived a great deal alone, and I dare say I might have found it hard to be thrown with other girls and to give up my own ways. But I am not at all afraid now, for after what I have suffered I have vowed to be good—very good—all the rest of my life."

"Well then, you have just to bear this in mind," said nurse: "God Almighty must help you, and desperate hard too, or you will fail. I prayed for you, my darling, when I didn't know that I'd ever see your sweet face again, and I'll go on praying for you; and I hope you will be happy at school, and that you will learn a lot, so that when your father and mother come back they will be proud of you—as I always am, my dear, sweet lamb."

Miss Neil came early on the following morning and took Christian to Paddington; and this time there was no attempt at running away, and no adventure of any sort, for Miss Neil and Christian had a first-class carriage to themselves for the greater part of the journey.

They reached Tregellick at six o'clock, when it was quite dark, and there a brougham was waiting for them; and after driving for about a mile they found themselves outside the town, in the heart of the country. They drove on a little farther, and Christian, gazing out through the darkness, fancied she saw the gleam of white foam caused by the waves of the Atlantic, and the noise of the sea came loudly, with an insistent splash, against her ears. This noise moved and delighted her. She grasped Miss Neil's hand.

"I shall like living here," she said.

Miss Neil replied calmly, "I hope you will, Christian. You quite understand, my dear, that the school is a strict one, and the first thing you have to learn is absolute obedience. From what I hear, there is very little liberty granted to the girls of Penwerne; but for those who are right-minded there is to be found in your new school a growth and strength both moral and physical."

"Oh, dear, I do wish she wouldn't speak in that lecturing sort of way!" thought Christian to herself; but then she remembered her vow that she would never be cross, even with Miss Neil, again, and she shut her lips and said nothing more.

By and by the carriage drew up outside some tall iron gates, which were opened by a neat-looking woman in a white cap. Christian caught sight of the lodge, with a bright lamp placed in one of the windows, as they drove swiftly up the long avenue. They stopped before a very long, low house, with many lights twinkling in many windows, and a deep porch to the front door. As soon as ever the sound of wheels was heard, a neat-looking servant flung the door wide open; then she came out and helped Miss Neil and Christian to get out of the cab.

"Will you have the goodness to tell Miss Peacock that Miss Neil and the little girl, Christian Mitford, have arrived?" said Miss Neil to the servant. "And see, please, that Miss Mitford's luggage and my handbag are brought indoors."

"Yes, madam," said the servant. "Will you walk this way, please?"

She took them into a very wide hall, brightly lighted with electric light, and with an ingle-nook at the farther end where a great fire of logs burned on the hearth.

Christian was cold, and a sense of depression, notwithstanding all her brave efforts, was creeping over her. She looked at Miss Neil, and thought she had seldom seen a more disagreeable or sterner face.

"I am so thankful," thought the child, "that she is not going to teach me—that she is not going to stay here. I couldn't be good with her; that's quite certain. But, all the same, I will keep my vow."

They were shown into a small, cheerful room, which also had a fire burning. The servant withdrew, saying in a respectful voice as she did so, "I will tell my mistress, and she will send someone to you."

"Dear me, Christian!" said Miss Neil when the door had closed and they found themselves alone; "what a particularly pleasant, cheerful sort of place this seems to be! Not at all my idea of a strict school. My dear, do hold yourself up; you don't know how that stoop ruins your appearance. Your parents are very particular about you, and they expect so much of you that the very least you can do now is to make extra efforts to be good in the highest sense of the word. Goodness includes deportment, Christian; perhaps you don't understand that."

"Oh, yes, I do, Miss Neil," said Christian, who was almost biting her lips to keep her tongue from saying something pert.

"You of course also understand," continued Miss Neil, "that you are not now arriving at school with any *éclat*. You have been exceedingly naughty, and I rather fancy your punishment awaits you here. I am not certain, of course, but I rather fancy that such is the case."

"What do you mean?" said Christian, in alarm.

"My dear, I say nothing further. Time will prove; time will prove. But it really is most kind of Miss Peacock to have you at all. There were moments when I feared you would not be received at Penwerne. That fact would have been a slur upon you all your life. Ah! and here comes——"

The door was thrown open, and a tall, very graceful woman of about forty years of age entered. Her face was very sweet, but there was no lack of power in it; on the contrary, it looked strong, steadfast, self-assured. The eyes were the brightest Christian had ever looked at. She felt certain, on the spur of the moment, that this woman had known sorrow—that she had conquered sorrow. Her heart went out to her on the spot.

Miss Peacock bowed to Miss Neil, and then, taking both Christian's hands, she drew the young girl towards her and kissed her gravely on the forehead.

"Welcome," she said.

The one word seemed full both of strength and love. The depression which had fallen upon Christian vanished on the spot.

"I will be good," she said, and she raised her eyes full of tears and fixed them on her mistress's face.

"I hope you will. But this is not the time to talk of goodness or of naughtiness; you are so tired that what you want is rest. Never mind to-night about being good or bad, clever or ignorant. You must have your supper and then go to bed. Miss Neil, I am glad to tell you that I am able to give Christian, for a time at least, a little bedroom to herself. Susan Sykes as a rule shares the room, but she is ill and not able to return. Until she does Christian will have the room to herself."

"Oh, I am glad!" said Christian.

"And you ought to be, Christian," said Miss Neil in her tartest voice, "for you don't deserve indulgences."

"Oh, come!" said Miss Peacock. "We never talk of faults—at least in this house—except when we are punishing them; and I think Christian was punished. She begins here with a clean sheet. Now, my dear, I am going to put you in the charge of Jessie, who is my right-hand and looks after all the comforts the girls require."

As Miss Peacock spoke she touched the electric bell by the side of the fireplace, and the same pleasant-looking servant-girl who had shown them into the house appeared.

"Ask Miss Jessie to step into the hall waiting room," said Miss Peacock.

The servant withdrew, and in a very short time a girlish-looking person, who might have been one of the schoolgirls herself, entered. That was Christian's first impression with regard to Miss Jessie Jones, but when she looked again she began to perceive that Miss Jessie was not quite so young as she appeared. She was dressed in a peculiar and old-fashioned way. Her rather skimpily cut skirt reached barely to her neat ankles, and over it she wore a muslin apron with a bib. The apron was frilled all round, and daintily finished with bows of pale-blue ribbon. Miss Jessie's hair was in short ringlets—it was of a soft, blonde color—her face was pink-and-white, and her eyes blue. Her little figure was also exceedingly neat. She ran into the room, and said in a gay voice:

"Well, dear Miss Peacock, here I am."

"I want you, Jessie, to take this young girl—my new pupil, Christian Mitford—and look after her. You must do everything for her that she requires; and I should like her to go early to bed. Did you ask Robinson to light a fire in her room?"

"Certainly, dear Miss Peacock; the room is in perfect order, and there is a bright fire."

"Well then, good-night, Christian," said Miss Peacock. "I leave you in safe hands. You will see your friend Miss Neil to-morrow."

"Good-night, Christian," said Miss Neil; "and be thankful for your mercies."

Christian left the room, accompanied by Miss Jessie.

"I am glad you have come at last," said the latter. "We have been all looking forward to seeing you. You can scarcely imagine how disappointed we were when you could not arrive a fortnight ago."

"Oh, please don't speak of it!" said Christian.

"But why not? We were so sorry. Dear Miss Peacock said you were unavoidably detained. She did not tell us what had happened. She only said you could not come to school for at least ten days."

"It was sweet of her," said Christian. Then she added impulsively, "Isn't she the very nicest and best woman in the world?"

"Ah!" said Miss Jessie, with a laugh, "you have fallen in love with her, as we all do. There never was anybody quite like Lavinia Peacock. Don't you think her name sweet? Lavinia, like an old-fashioned flower; and then Peacock—like that gorgeous bird. But nothing could be too good for her; she is perfect. The girls adore her—they love her almost too well. Yes, she makes sunshine wherever she goes. Not that it's all sunshine at Penwerne by any means. But I will tell you about that presently—not to-night; you look tired. Are you tired? Have you quite got over whatever detained you?"

"Quite; and please don't speak of it."

"I won't if you don't wish. The mistresses here never do anything to worry the girls; we never nag, if you understand what that means."

"And are you a mistress?"

A sad look came into the sweet face of little Miss Jessie.

"No; I am not exactly one of the mistresses," she said. "I don't exactly know what I am, except that my province in the school is to spread happiness. That is what dear Lavinia wishes. 'Make them happy, Jessie, and you'll do all that I require,' she says. I generally get a new girl for the first night—perhaps longer. She trusts me. You see, I am not at all a frightening sort of person."

"I shouldn't think you were," said Christian.

"You look a very nice girl, dear—nice-looking, I mean—rather distinguished. Lavinia wouldn't like me to say anything of that kind, so I oughtn't to; but you really do. Now then, will you come in to the refectory, or will you have something brought up to your own room?"

"Oh, something in my room, please, if it isn't too much trouble," said Christian.

"Trouble, dear? Whenever did Jessie find anything a trouble? It is her business to do this sort of thing if it adds to the happiness of anyone. We will go straight upstairs, then; you won't want to see any of your companions to-night?"

"I think not."

Miss Jessie paused. It seemed to Christian as they were walking up the low, softly carpeted stairs, and down first one long corridor and then another, that there was a murmuring sound as though of bees. She could not make out if it was caused by the Atlantic or by voices.

"They are anxious to see you. They begged and implored of me; but you shall have your way."

"I would much rather not see anybody but you until to-morrow."

"You dear child, you shan't be crossed. But just one moment."

Miss Jessie paused outside a door. The sound of bees was now unmistakably changed for the sound of voices.

"No, darlings, not to-night; she is tired. Don't ask it, pets. You never cross Jessie, do you? That's all right, loves."

The door was shut again, and she took Christian's hand.

"They are dear girls, although we have one or two black sheep. Of course I must not name them. We are all trying — we who belong, I hope, to the white sheep—to turn them from the error of their ways. Now then, here is your room."

The door was opened, and Christian found herself in a dainty chamber lined with white enameled wood. The wood went right up to the ceiling, and across it; and in the ceiling itself were two bright eyes, caused by electric light. Miss Jessie showed the young girl how she could turn it on and off. In a pretty grate lined with pink tiles a bright fire was blazing. There were two beds at the farther end, one covered with a pretty Liberty coverlet and unmade, and the other with a snowy white sheet turned down. The look of the little bed was most inviting. There were white dimity curtains to the windows. The white effect of everything, with the pink tiles, the blazing fire, and the crimson felt on the floor, made Christian feel that she had never been in so sweet a chamber before.

"You will be happy here, I know," said Miss Jessie. "We are all intensely happy at Penwerne. Who could help it who was under the guardianship of Lavinia Peacock?"

When Miss Jessie had seen that Christian had all she required, even to a can of nice hot water, she kissed her and went away. Christian thought that she would not see her again that night. She felt contented, soothed, and happy. How silly she had been to dread this charming school, this life so full of interest! As she thought of Miss Peacock, and remembered the look on her face, she felt her heart glow already with love for her new mistress. Then how sweet and kind dear Miss Jessie was!

As she ate her supper, and unlocked her trunk and took out just what was necessary for the night's requirements, she thought again of Miss Peacock's great kindness in not speaking to the school of what had really happened.

"She said I was unavoidably detained," thought the child. "She shielded me. There are very few who would do that. I love her already. If I am not good after so much kindness, I shall be the very worst girl in the world."

Christian said her prayers—quite earnest ones, in which she implored of God to help her—and then she got into bed. She was just getting warm between the cozy sheets, when the door was softly opened and little Miss Jessie peeped in.

"Ah! you are in bed," she said; "that's right. I have only come to fetch the tray. Your fire will burn for some hours. It is so cold just at present that we will have it lit before you get up in the morning. That is a special indulgence which will only be granted to you just for to-morrow. To-morrow will be a complete holiday for you. I thought you might like to know. You will be able to unpack and get everything into apple-pie order. Then you will make the acquaintance of the girls, and get to know the ways of the school. You will probably have some lessons to prepare for the next day, but only if you are quite well enough to undertake them. Miss Peacock said I was to be very careful about you. I suppose that is on account of your illness that kept you from school."

As Miss Jessie said the last words Christian suddenly sat up in bed.

"I wasn't kept away from school by illness," she said in a choking voice.

"Well, never mind, dear; it doesn't matter what it was. Our dear head-mistress knows."

"Miss Jessie," said Christian, "I don't know what your other name is."

"I am never called by it, dearest. My other name is Jones; quite a common name, isn't it? But I am always known here as Jessie, or Miss Jessie. Lie down now and go to sleep."

"I can't until I tell you something. I must tell you."

"Well, love, if it relieves your mind; but really and truly I would much rather——"

In the firelight little Miss Jessie's face looked quite troubled; she took both of Christian's hands.

"You are excited," she said. "You have traveled far; the effects of your illness are still perceptible."

"Oh, I wasn't ill! It is about that I want to speak to you. You at least must know the truth."

"Oh, but I never know things of that sort," said Miss Jessie in an alarmed voice. "Dear Lavinia Peacock would be distressed. I beg of you, my child. Oh, what is it? Actually the dear child is crying. Well, of course, Christian, if it relieves your mind, dear——"

"It does—it does!" said Christian. "I couldn't sleep to-night if you didn't know it. It wasn't illness."

"My dear, dear child."

"It was naughtiness."

"Children are often naughty," said Miss Jessie.

"But not like my naughtiness. It was big—it was worse; it was wickedness. I ran away."

"You did what, dear?" said Miss Jessie; and now she backed from Christian and looked at her with her round, rosy, good-natured face paling with horror.

She said afterwards to herself, "I was glad there was only firelight, and that I was standing with my back to it, for the poor child would have seen how horrified I felt."

"Yes," said Christian, "I ran away that day a fortnight back when you were expecting me. I went to the station with Miss Neil. I left her and went away with another little girl. We had planned it all out together. We went to an awful place in the slums for the night. Oh, it was fearful—fearful! We nearly died from fright. We were well punished. The next day we got home, but it was a terrible adventure, and it nearly killed us both. It was not illness; it was what I have said."

Miss Jessie had now recovered her ordinary composure.

"My dear," she said, "I am glad and sorry you have told me. You may be quite sure that I shall never repeat it to anyone. There is just one thing, Christian: you must not on any account—on any account whatever—breathe this story in the school. It would not be understood, dear. It would make your position unfortunate. I cannot explain matters. Our code of honor is very high, and we like all our girls to have a clean record—never to do what is daring and downright wicked. Ah, yes, Christian, we repent, but somehow the flavor of the sin remains. Ah, Christian, I will tell you a story of another little girl some day—not to-night. Good-night, now. It was brave of you to tell, and I will speak to Lavinia about it; but whatever happens, this must on no account be known in the school."

Miss Jessie tripped softly away, and Christian, soothed by the light of the fire, by the knowledge that she had unburdened herself, by the resolve that, come what would, she would do the very best that was possible for a girl to do in the future, dropped asleep.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MANOR SCHOOL

THERE were forty boarders at Penwerne House. Their ages varied from thirteen to eighteen. They were almost all English girls, well brought up, and of good family. The house was very old, but extremely roomy. There were corridors and long passages and endless small rooms in every imaginable direction. But although the house was really so very ancient, the appearance of the rooms themselves spoke of a far more luxurious state of living than people required at the time when Penwerne Manor was built; for Miss Peacock had taken extraordinary pains with her school, and the old rooms, wainscoted in the first instance, were now enameled many pale shades of beautiful colors —some ivory white, some the palest green, some blue, some pink. There were whole corridors with only pink rooms, and whole corridors with only blue ones; but the girls who had the choicest and largest rooms were those who slept in the white chambers, as they were called.

Christian's room was one of a series that went down the entire length of a corridor. Each of these pretty rooms boasted of two windows, and in each two neat brass-mounted bedsteads were placed. Christian thought herself in great luck to have a room to herself at first, and prepared to enjoy herself thoroughly.

Miss Neil came up to the young girl's room to say good-by to her early on the following morning.

"Well, my dear," she said, "I am sure you are in luck. What a nice little room! Not little, though—quite a good-sized room. And you have it to yourself. You ought to be exceedingly thankful, Christian; you are a most lucky girl. I shall write to your dear father and mother without fail by the next mail. You had better do the same. They will have got over their dreadful shock about you by the time they receive that letter. And now, dear, I must say good-by. Here is a little money that you may need for pocket-money; and when you want anything more you have but to write to me—Elm Lodge, Denvers Road, Southsea. See, I have written the address distinctly on this paper. Miss Peacock knows that she is to apply to me in any difficulty. You will stay here at Easter, or go away with Miss Peacock, just as she thinks best; but if you like to spend some of your summer holidays with me, I dare say I can arrange it, but I cannot positively promise. I will do my best. Here are the two sovereigns. You must make them do until Easter; as every possible want is supplied, you cannot require more money than this. I have asked Miss Peacock, and—somewhat reluctantly, I must say—she has complied with my wish that your letters are, for the present at least, to be overlooked; except, of course, those to your parents. It is necessary, Christian, that this should be done; and there is no use in your frowning over the matter, for a girl who could behave in the disgraceful way you did cannot expect to be trusted. You are, of course, absolutely forbidden to correspond with that naughty little Rose Latimer; and even your nurse can only receive letters which Miss Peacock has read. Now, I think that is all. Be good. Thank your lucky star that you have come to such a considerate mistress; for if she had proclaimed through the school the enormity of your act you would have had a sorry time. I certainly never asked her to conceal it.

I thought she naturally would tell, and I felt that if she had done so it would be a due punishment to you for your disgraceful behavior; but she thinks otherwise, and as she has the care of your education for the present, I must of course bow to her decree. Good-by, Christian. I trust you will keep well, and be—as you ought to be—happy."

Miss Neil gave Christian a little peck on her forehead and then on her lips, after which she hurried from the room.

According to Miss Jessie's promise, a fire had again been lit in the young girl's chamber, and a neat-looking servant had brought in coffee, toast, and rolls.

Christian ate her breakfast, and then waited somewhat shyly, wondering what would happen next. Presently a great bell sounded all over the house, and a minute later Miss Jessie bustled in.

"Ah! you are dressed," she said; "that is right. And very neat you look in your pretty gray dress, with that nice frilled apron. Miss Peacock will quite approve of your appearance. Most of our girls wear their hair plaited behind, but I see you wear yours quite loose. Well, never mind; you have pretty hair, dear—very pretty. Now then, come with me, for the prayer-bell has rung. You will see your companions at prayers. Soon, I trust, you will be quite happy, and a busy member of a useful family."

Miss Jessie took Christian's hand and walked quickly down the corridor. Doors were pushed open as she went, and more than one bright head, with curling hair and laughing eyes, looked out. Christian felt a sudden and intense accession of shyness; she dared not glance at any of her schoolfellows. Her heart began to beat loudly in her ears, and by the time she reached the great hall, where prayers were always read by Miss Peacock, she was scarlet. There was a tittering laugh from a girl as she went up to the seat appointed for her near Miss Jessie. Another girl said "Hush!" and then in the midst of the solemn stillness Miss Peacock read the lesson for the day. This was followed by a short prayer, and after the girls had risen from their knees and the servants had withdrawn, Miss Peacock mounted a little dais near her own desk and looked around her.

"Wait a minute, girls," she said; "I want to introduce you to your new schoolfellow. Come here, Christian Mitford."

Christian advanced tremulously.

"This, my dear young people, is Christian Mitford, your new companion; and, I trust, your new friend. She has never been in Cornwall before, nor has she ever been in a boarding-school. Is that correct, Christian?"

"Yes, madam," said Christian in a low voice.

"Our ways, therefore," continued the head-mistress, "will be strange to her, and I trust that each girl in the school will do her utmost to make her happy by kindness, by sympathy, by showing her the ropes, by letting her feel that you are glad to have her with you. I trust you all, my dear girls, and know you will do your best for this young stranger. I put her into the care of—Ah! Louisa Twining, my dear, come here."

A slender girl, with soft, neat brown hair and brown eyes to match, left her companions and walked up the room.

"Louisa," said Miss Peacock, "this is Christian Mitford. Will you please see after her a bit, and let her stay by you in class, and take her into the playground afterwards, and tell her all about the school and the life here?"

"Yes, Miss Peacock," said Louisa.

She looked kindly at Christian as she spoke.

"Christian," said Miss Peacock, "you are in safe hands when I give you into the charge of Louisa Twining. She is one of my oldest and most trusted pupils. Now then, dear, it is the custom that the new pupil should not have any lessons to do on the day after her arrival. Your time is therefore absolutely your own, and you can unpack your things and put them away in the neat cupboards in your room. You can arrange your schoolroom desk, and ask for what books you require from your English teacher, Miss Forest; and, in short, do anything you please. I should counsel you to take Louisa absolutely into your confidence, for she is a very sure guide for a new-comer. To-morrow you take your place with the other pupils. I shall be glad to see you in my own private room at five o'clock to tea. And now for the present, good-by, dear."

Miss Peacock nodded to Christian, smiled at Louisa, and left the room.

Louisa looked hard at Christian.

"Come," she said; "we must be great chums, mustn't we?"

"Oh, if you would be kind to me!" said poor Christian.

Her shyness was getting worse; the tears were very near her eyes, but she did not dare to let them appear.

"I will introduce you to some of the others," said Louisa. "The sooner you know us all the better. First of all, how old are you?"

"I shall be fourteen in three months' time."

"Oh, we make a great fuss about birthdays here; but yours is some way off yet. You are only thirteen at present. Do you know that I am nearly sixteen, and I am not much taller than you."

"I always knew that I was very tall," said Christian. "I hate it myself; I'd much rather be a little girl."

"If you happened to be a little girl you would anything but wish it, I can assure you. But now here we are; here is a whole bevy of the girls, all so curious about you, and so anxious to be nice and kind."

"Well, Twine dear," said a merry-looking girl of about fourteen years of age, bounding forward when she saw Louisa issuing out of the hall accompanied by Christian, "so you have got her. You are the privileged one. Now, I wanted to be. It's most unfair that you should have all the plums, Twiny."

"Don't be a goose, Florry. You know that Miss Peacock would not give the charge of a new girl to a little mite like you."

"Little mite indeed!" laughed Florry, tossing her head. "Well, I suppose, whatever happens, I may talk to the sacred being."

"Don't!" said Christian suddenly, and speaking with irritation.

"She hates to be laughed at; can't you see that?" said Louisa, speaking angrily.

She had scarcely said the words before a mocking voice, which seemed to come from over their heads, cried in a high staccato:

"She hates to be laughed at; can't you see that?"

Christian looked round. She was startled and alarmed.

"That's only Star; she is incorrigible," said Louisa. "You will have to get accustomed to her. But come now; you would like to see the schoolroom. You will have your own desk, but its exact position I can't tell you; your teachers will first have to find out what you know."

Now, Christian knew a great deal. From her earliest days she had been well educated, and with regard to her attainments she was decidedly above the average girl.

As she remembered this fact a sense of satisfaction stole over her. Nevertheless she felt exceedingly depressed and considerably alarmed.

Louisa and Christian walked quickly to the farther end of the hall, and Florence returned to her companions. Louisa now spoke quickly.

"You must not get frightened; or, at least, if you are frightened you must not show it. I assure you if you do your life won't be worth living here. We are all rather a nice set of girls, but there are a few of us who have an intolerable habit of teasing. If it is noticed that you are easily impressed, or thin-skinned, you will be made thoroughly unhappy. Your only plan is not to care one little bit what anyone says to you, or what anyone does. Don't be startled when stupid jokes are sprung on you. You did look so ridiculously alarmed when Star called out that sentence just now."

"Of course I was. I can't think how she did it. Was she hanging on to the ceiling anywhere?"

"Not a bit of it. Star Lestrange is immensely popular, because she has got the power of ventriloquism. She can throw her voice anywhere. I assure you there was a time when she terrified me. But now I am accustomed to her, and she is so funny—so audacious. On one occasion she whispered just above Miss Peacock's forehead, "Bless you, sweet angel!" She nearly got into a scrape about that, for although we are treated in this school in the most heavenly way, Miss Peacock is intensely particular, and the discipline is sound—I must say it. There can be no crooked ways in this school, nor obscure corners in the life of any girl who lives here. Woe betide her if she has anything in her past that she wants to hide. Why, how red you are getting! Aren't you strong?"

"Yes, thank you."

"You are nervous. Now, do take my advice: don't show it to the others; just uphold your own dignity. I wish you could have seen Star when she first came to the school. They tried to bully her a bit, some of the most mischievous spirits, but didn't she crush them all round? She's awfully good-natured, you know, and she wouldn't hurt you really for the world; but she has such mad spirits, she has to give way now and then. Now, I mustn't gossip any more. We work here from nine to eleven."

"But isn't it long past nine now?" asked Christian.

Louisa laughed. "Of course not," she said. "It is five minutes to nine. You had your breakfast at seven. You will have to come down to refectory breakfast to-morrow. You are going to be awfully indulged and petted to-day. I suppose that is on account of your illness."

"But I haven't been ill," said Christian, and her face became crimson.

"Then what was the matter with you? Why were you unavoidably detained?"

"Oh, please don't question me," said Christian.

"Why can't you speak? The girls will expect you to do so this evening. We always get a new girl to tell us as much as ever she can of her life's story—after dark. You look as though you were a splendid story-teller. Are you?"

"I could tell you some stories," said Christian.

She thought of her darling attic and the heroines of her past life. Nevertheless, her terrors were getting greater each moment. If the girls insisted on questioning her with regard to the unlooked-for circumstances which were supposed to have detained her, she would certainly betray herself; and for a girl like Star

Lestrange to know of such an escapade would cause poor Christian almost to lose her senses.

"I will introduce you to the nicest girls," said Louisa, who was watching her face—"the nicest and the kindest—and I will ask them to look after you when I am not with you myself."

"But mayn't I stay near you all day? Oh, I wish—I wish you'd let me."

"You dear young thing, of course you may. But then you see to-morrow will come, and the day after, and the day after that. I am in the sixth class of the school. I am rather young to be there, but I am, all the same; and I am proud of it, I can tell you. You, of course, will be in a different class, and you must associate with the girls of your own age. You see, you can't help yourself. You will have great fun after a bit. Here come the mistresses and the girls, and lessons have begun. Sit down near me at this desk, and listen with all your might. Miss Forest and Mademoiselle le Brume may question you a bit about your attainments this morning. I am not quite certain, but I think they will."

"I wish they would; I'd much rather," said Christian.

"Would you really? Then I'll go and speak to Miss Forest at once."

Each desk now had a bright and merry or a grave and serious girl seated before it, and forty pairs of eyes were darting from time to time in Christian's direction—some quizzical, some indifferent, some alive with curiosity; some sober, earnest, kind. But whatever the feelings that dwelt in the minds of the girls who owned the eyes, they all kept gazing at Christian, who felt at last as though she were under forty pairs of burning glasses, so keen became the torture.

Presently Louisa returned.

"Miss Forest will see you in half and hour, and Mademoiselle says you must go to her in the French room when the rest of us are at play. Our music-master, too, Mr. Frederick, is coming to-day, and you may as well let him hear what you can do. Oh, you will soon be very busy and very happy. And now don't look at the girls; or if you want to look at them, stare well. That will put them in a good humor, and they will stop staring at you."

CHAPTER XIV

SCHOOLGIRLS

CHRISTIAN went through the ordeal with the mistresses and the music-master with much *éclat.* Miss Forest was evidently surprised at her knowledge of English history and literature, at her grammatical accuracy—for she set her a short essay to write—and at her knowledge generally. Madamoiselle was equally delighted with the purity of her French accent, and with the admirable way she translated a paragraph from a rather difficult French story-book. And, finally, Mr. Frederick said that she had real talent for music, and that he looked forward with much pleasure to conducting the studies of a pupil who would do him such credit.

Christian enjoyed herself during this time. She forgot her fears; she felt stimulated to do her very best. Finally, she returned to the schoolroom with a sort of halo round her brow. She was certain that she had done well.

Soon it was whispered all over the school that Christian Mitford was nothing short of a genius—that she was one of the cleverest girls who had ever come to the school. These reports were of course exaggerated; but still the solid fact remained that she was put into the fourth class for all English studies, and into the lower fifth for French and music. That a girl of thirteen was in such a position spoke for itself. Florry, whose other name was Burton, looked at her with great black eyes of envy. Star Lestrange flung the words to the ceiling just above Christian's head:

"She's a genius, and she knows it, the darling young thing."

The look on Florry's face and the expression of mischief in Star's bright dancing eyes brought Christian back to the fact that attainments alone and a strong wish for study did not necessarily secure happiness in a school like Penwerne Manor. She could not get over her nervous fears.

"I deserve it," she said to herself. "I should not be one scrap—no, not one scrap—afraid if I hadn't done wrong; but it is just the terror of their finding out that keeps my heart beating so hard. Oh, dear! oh, dear! There's no way out, for I can't run way again, and father and mother are nearly in India now. As to Miss Neil, she saw no sympathy with anyone; and poor dear nurse and Miss Thompson can't help me even if they wish to. Oh, dear! I am an unhappy girl."

Christian was standing by herself in one corner of the great playground as these thoughts visited her. Presently a hand was laid on her shoulder, and beautiful little Star stood by her side.

"Let's be friends, Christian," she said in a hearty voice.

"Will you?" answered Christian, her eyes brightening.

"I'd like to," said Star. "I took a fancy to you the moment I saw your face, even though you did look so alarmed and so startled."

"You'd have been startled too," said Christian stoutly, "if you had heard an awful voice on the ceiling above your head talking about you."

Star laughed; then she looked grave.

"I can't help it," she said. "I really can't break myself of it. Darling Miss Peacock is sometimes angry; but who could resist the fun who had the power? Oh!

the fright on your face a couple of hours ago was killing. You looked as though anyone could knock you down."

"But you did it twice," said Christian.

"Yes, my young genius, I did. But never mind me; when I ventriloquize, just acknowledge my talent, but at the same time consider me your friend. You and I are in the same class, and we can't help knocking up against each other. By the way, where is your bedroom? In the White Corridor?"

Christian nodded.

"I thought as much. I am in the White Corridor too. We may as well be friends, for I'm sure I'd be a disagreeable enemy."

"I'd love to be your friend," said Christian. "Do you really mean it?"

"I always mean what I say. You ask Lucy Norris. Have you met Lucy—little, satin-faced Lucy, with hair that shines like a looking-glass, blue eyes, rosebud lips, and cheeks the color of the peach? Ah, there she is! I'll call her. Lucy, beloved. Lucy! I say, Lucy! Lucy!"

The girl whom Star had so cleverly described looked round her in a startled way; then her eyes met the bright ones of Star Lestrange, and she ran up to her.

"What is it, Star? What do you want?"

"Your Satinship," replied Star. "I want very specially to introduce you to my new friend, Christian Mitford. I want you and me and one or two others to form a sort of bodyguard round her. You see——" Star's voice dropped. She bent towards Lucy and whsipered something in her ear.

Lucy colored and nodded. "You don't really think so?" she said.

"I am certain of it," responded Star. "That is what will happen unless we take care. Oh, don't you be frightened, my love," she continued, patting Christian with a sort of affectionate condescension, on the arm. "Lucy and I and——"

"Angela Goring," suddenly burst from Lucy's lips.

"Good, Lucy—capital! Lucy, Angel Goring, and I—— We must have one more, Lucy. Jane Price."

"Oh, why Jane Price?" said Lucy.

"Because she's just admirable. She's so stolid, you know, and so matter-of-fact, and so intensely sensible. We don't want all the flyaway girls of the school."

"I'm not flyaway, I'm sure," said Lucy.

"Except when you follow the erratic movements of the Star," replied Star, her eyes twinkling.

"You do lead us, and you know it, Star," said Lucy. "But, there! Angela will do nicely."

"Find her, then, love," said Star.

Lucy rushed away.

"What do you mean by a bodyguard? And why should I require one?" said Christian.

"My dear love, it will be only for a week or a fortnight, just to get you into the ways. The fact is, this school, for all its admirable qualities, has in it one or two black sheep. Now, I mustn't breathe any names; dear, sweet Miss Peacock never guesses at their existence, and we none of us ever mean to tell. You are the veriest of all very victims for such girls; therefore I want to guard you. Ah! here comes Angela. Hasn't she a nice face?"

A very tall, very slight girl, with coal-black hair and large, luminous dark eyes, now appeared. She was dressed in a rough gray tweed, with a leather belt round her waist. Her hair hung in a thick plait far below her waist.

"Angela," said Star, "Lucy has told you what we want you for."

"And I am very pleased," said Angela.

She spoke in a low, somewhat deep voice. Her eyes were resting on Christian as though she were already protecting her.

"Now for Jane Price, and our guard is complete," said Star.

Lucy appeared, leading Jane by the hand. Jane was a short, dumpy, and very plain girl. She had an enormous forehead and thin hair. Her hair was cut to a line level with her neck. Her dress was short, sensible, ugly. Her hands were big and somewhat red. She had small, honest eyes and a large mouth.

"Jane," said Star in a sprightly tone, "you are just the very person we want. This is the victim; we will guard her, won't we?"

"Three cheers!" cried Lucy. "Of course we will."

"You must come to us if you are in any difficulty, Christian," said Angela.

"And just let me know and I'll punch 'em all round," was Jane's remark.

Christian's face was very pale.

"Thank you all," she said. "No doubt you mean it in kindness, but I feel more frightened than ever."

"Oh, dear! the poor, sweet thing!" said Star. "Has anybody got a lollypop?"

Immediately three hands were thrust into three pockets. Star's alone was unattacked. She shook her head sadly.

"I haven't got any," she said. "I ate all mine up last night after I got into bed. Four-and-twenty I consumed, and I was none the worse this morning."

"You know that was very naughty of you, Star," said Angela.

"My dear, I can't help my propensities; never could. Oh, dear! oh, dear! sometimes I scarcely like to look into the beautiful, kind eyes of our beloved Lavinia, so naughty do I feel. And yet I'm not really naughty. I'm not rabid, I mean; am I, girls?"

"You are a duck and a darling," said Lucy.

"Well, your Satinship, have you got any sweeties, any fondants, any caramels?" interrupted Star.

A few rather sticky ones were produced. Christian suddenly found her voice

"Do you really care for sweets?" she asked.

"Do we really care for sweets?" cried Star. "Aren't we schoolgirls? What do you mean?"

"Only that I have got such a big box. Miss Thompson bought them for me; and another box full of little cakes."

A wild cheer immediately was given. Handkerchiefs were waved in the air; the girls clapped and laughed until they nearly cried.

"Isn't she worth guarding? Won't we guard her double quick?" said Star. "You angel, we will attack those dainties presently, but now let us pace up and down in this corner of the playground."

"I am to see Miss Peacock at five o'clock," said Christian.

"You lucky young beggar! But, of course, I forgot; first-day girls are always fussed over. You will be all right to-day, Christian; it's to-morrow that the tug-of-war will begin."

Christian was silent for a minute; then she said slowly:

"I thank you four girls very much indeed. I suppose it is safer for me to have you as my friends."

"Safer!" cried Angela. "Having us as your friends, you will never, never know what you have escaped."

"But would you mind telling me who the girls are? I mean the specially dreadful girls who are likely to be unkind. If I only knew I should not be so frightened."

"And that information we will never give you, dear genius," replied Star. "If you find out for yourself, alas for you! I only trust you will never find out. There's the tea-gong. Come in now; and you will sit at my table, as you belong to my class."

An hour later Christian found herself in Miss Peacock's presence. Miss Peacock was standing under a rose-colored lamp. She was reading a letter. Suddenly she raised her eyes and saw Christian. Christian was a striking-looking girl. She had a splendid carriage for her age; she held herself very erect, and kept her head well back on her shoulders. Her golden hair shone in the lamp-light. She came slowly forward, her eyes very wide open, her face pale, a look of entreaty round her mouth.

"Ah, Christian!" said Miss Peacock in a kind voice; "and how are you, dear? Are you taking your place in the school?"

"I don't know," replied Christian.

Miss Peacock took no notice of this vacillating remark. She motioned to Christian to seat herself in a shady corner, where she knew the young girl would be more comfortable than when exposed to the full glare of the light.

"I have got a very good report of you from your different mistresses and your music-master, dear," she said. "They all say you are remarkably well advanced for your age. That being the case, you will soon win a character for cleverness. A clever girl is always respected and thought a good deal of; and I trust you will be respected and looked up to, Christian, and that you will help to bring a good influence into this school—a religious and moral influence, the efficacy of which can never be overrated."

"Oh, please," said Christian, with a little gasp, "you know what I have done!"

Miss Peacock was quite silent for a minute.

"What you did," she then said very gravely, "happened before you came to me."

"I know; but it was because of you—because of coming to the school—that I did it."

Miss Peacock's eyes twinkled for a minute.

"Would you rather discuss the whole thing with me, Christian, or, on the other hand, would you rather let it lie—forget it, cover it up, go straight forward as though it had never been?"

"I think I'd rather discuss it with you. And," continued Christian, "I think I'd rather"—her voice faltered; it sank almost to a whisper—"I think I'd rather the other girls knew."

These words evidently startled Miss Peacock very much.

"You would rather your schoolfellows knew? But it has nothing to do with them."

"There would be nothing then to find out," continued Christian. "As it is, I shall live in fear. Oh! it was good of you—it was sweet of you—to keep it dark; but I think I would rather they knew."

Miss Peacock was amazed. She sat quite still for a minute; then she rose and walked to the other end of the room. She rang a bell, and in a few moments Jessie appeared. Jessie wore the same peculiar expression as she had worn the night before. The look of extreme juvenility, which vanished almost as soon as she began to speak, and her girlish dress, her girlish face, and her non-girlish voice, made her at once both striking and interesting.

"I understand from what Jessie has told me, that you have confided this matter to her, Christian," said Miss Peacock, turning to the young girl.

"I have. I had to; she was so very good to me, I could not let her live under the impression that I had been ill."

"I never gave anyone to understand that you were ill. I simply said that you were unavoidably detained. The girls are at liberty to form their own conclusions."

"There is an idea in the school that I was very ill," said Christian; "and," she added, "I don't like it, for you know"—she raised her clear eyes to Miss Peacock's face—"it is not true. You know it, don't you, Miss Peacock?"

Miss Peacock looked back at her with so intent a gaze that it seemed to the young girl that she was reading her through.

"Come here, Christian," she then said.

Christian rose. She now stood in the full light, and both Miss Peacock and Jessie could see the vivid pink in her cheeks and the brightness of her eyes. There was something about her which impressed them; the wonder on both their faces grew. At last Miss Peacock laid her hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Christian," she said, "you are a remarkably brave girl. You are a great deal braver than you have any idea of yourself. It would not be right to take you at your word without explaining matters. My dear, to have this escapade of yours known in the school would mean——"

"It cannot be known," interrupted Miss Jessie. "Miss Peacock, dear, it must not be known."

"That certainly was my feeling, Jessie; but if the child herself——"

"No, no," repeated Miss Jessie. "Even you, Miss Lavinia, can't guess all that goes on in a school like this."

"I shut my eyes on purpose," said Miss Peacock. "A school is a little world. In that world there must necessarily be evil; without evil good would have nothing to overcome. The brave girls will overcome the evil and rise on the wings of good. I don't want any girl at Penwerne Manor to be subjected to too severe a discipline, however—a discipline which may be greater than the strength of the girl can meet. Now Christian, you have asked me an extraordinary thing. You wish the school to be told about your conduct before you came here. You don't know enough, my dear, to make it possible for me to grant your request—at least yet. But come to me again at the end of a month, and if you still make the same request, I shall have pleasure in giving my own version of the whole affair to the girls of Penwerne Manor. I think that is all, Jessie; you can attend to your usual duties. Christian, come and sit on this stool near me; I should like to talk to you about long ago."

Miss Peacock drew the girl down to a seat close by her side.

"After what you have said, I put you in my own mind on a different footing from the other girls," she remarked. "Now, I am going to tell you something. I felt a great sense of rejoicing and a great sense of personal pleasure when I received a letter from your good father to say that he wished to place you at Penwerne Manor during his absence."

Christian made no reply. She raised her eyes and fixed them on Miss Peacock. Miss Peacock noticed the frank, earnest look in the large eyes, and she put out her soft, well-formed white hand and smoothed back the hair from Christian's forehead.

"My dear child," she said, "my reason for being so pleased was that I owe, I think I may say, all that is good in my own life to your grandmother."

"To granny?" said Christian, in astonishment. Then she added, "I scarcely ever heard anvthing of granny until lately, but father spoke of her, and said that I—I wonder if it is true—that I resemble her."

"You are decidedly like her in appearance; only, of course, when I knew her she was an elderly woman. But you are more like her in mind. That was exactly the sort of thing she would have done. She would have been intensely naughty, and then intensely repentant. But there, dear! you are looking tired and flushed. Perhaps you had better go up to your own room early. Be sure you come to me in any difficulty, and regard me as your special friend. Good-night dear, and God bless you."

CHAPTER XV

THE ORDEAL AND THE VICTIM

CHRISTIAN'S head ached; she had gone through a good deal that day. At Penwerne Manor, for all except the Sixth Form girls, supper was a very simple affair. It was held in the refectory at half-past seven, and consisted of bread and butter, stewed fruit, and milk. Christian sat down to the simple meal, but she was not hungry. For the first time she was absolutely thrown on her own resources. Lousia Twining, being one of the Sixth Form girls, was not present at the other girls' supper. Christian's bodyguard was also nowhere to be seen. She sat near a quiet-looking girl of the name of Agnes Temple, but Agnes seemed as much afraid of Christian as Christian was of her, and did not venture to question her at all.

As soon as supper was over the young girl went up to Miss Jessie, who was standing at the top of the room.

"Are you cold, Christian?" said Miss Jessie. "Come and warm yourself by the fire."

"I wanted to know," said Christian, "if I might go to bed; I am tired."

"Certainly, if you like."

But as Miss Jessie spoke she glanced round the room. Suddenly a tall, awkward-looking girl, whom Christian had not noticed before, stood up.

"Has Christian Mitford asked to retire nearly an hour before the usual time?" was her query.

"Certainly, Sukey; and seeing that she is very tired, I am about to give her leave."

"But I am afraid that I, Susan Marsh, and Maud Thompson and Mary Hillary and Janet Bouverie, as well as several others in the school, cannot give Christian Mitford leave to go to bed without the usual ceremony being gone through."

Christian looked with some amazement first at the tall girl, then at Miss Jessie. To her surprise, she noticed that Miss Jessie's face got very red and then very white. The little lady went quickly down the length of the room, and laying a hand on Susan Marsh's shoulder, whispered something in her ear. She had to stand on tiptoe to make her remark, and Susan looked down at her and shook her head gravely. Miss Jessie then turned to the other girls, who also shook their heads. By and by the little lady had to go back again to Christian.

"It can't be helped, Christian, dear," she said. "Every girl goes through it; it is a sort of ordeal which seems to be part and parcel of the Manor. I can, if you wish it, apply to Miss Peacock; but I think I would rather not, and if you are wise you will not do so. It would squash the whole thing, but it would not be for your best happiness."

"Oh, I am not afraid—not really," said Christian; "and please don't say anything to Miss Peacock."

"You are a good girl. Now, the best thing you can do is to appear quite indifferent; then they won't get much fun out of you, and you will be all right."

"What is that about Christian, and having much fun, and being all right?" suddenly said a gay voice; and Star Lestrange, in a pale-blue frock, looking as pretty as a girl could look, danced into the room.

"The usual thing; you know all about it," said Miss Jessie.

"Of course I do; and so does Lucy Norris, and so does Jane Price, and so does Angela Goring."

"So many," said Miss Jessie in a tone of relief.

"Yes, Jessie, my honey, so you may go to bed with an easy mind; your new fledgling won't come to any harm. Now, come along, Christian. You have us four to look after you. We can't appear publicly as your bodyguard, but see if you won't feel our influence."

Christian, in her relief, almost squeezed Star's hand.

"Don't," said Star, who seemed to read her thought in her eyes. "It's not the fashion at Penwerne Manor to show much outward affection. I mean we never kiss, and we don't clasp arms much, or anything of that sort—not until we turn ourselves into what we call 'loverettes.' Sometimes two girls make a great friendship and declare it publicly in the school; then they're dubbed 'loverettes' by their fellows, and are allowed to sit alone, and walk about arm in arm. But that sort of thing doesn't often happen; and, for my part," continued Star, "I hate it."

"And yet I should have thought you were very affectionate," said Christian.

"Should you?" answered Star, favoring her with a full glance, which caused the young girl to shrink into her shoes.

In the corridor outside Susan Marsh was waiting. She had the most peculiar face Christian had ever seen in her life. It was not only plain, it was downright ugly; there was not one feature in harmony with another. She was very tall and very awkward in her movements. Her complexion was of a dull mud color; her hair was a dull, very light brown; her eyes were small, her nose broad at the nostrils and very *retroussé*, her mouth wide. She had good teeth, but otherwise scarcely a redeeming feature. The expression of her face was as little pleasing as were her features. Nevertheless this girl had an extraordinary power over her fellows; she was never seen without a following, and many a little girl looked at her with a mingling of awe and terror as she waited now for Christian.

"So you are coming, Star," she said. "Well so much the better; we'll have some fun. Cheer up, victim; it's your night to go through the ceremony."

"But what is it?" said Christian.

"You will know, my pretty victim, when the time comes. We always have it in the big attic. It is great fun; it is the most delightful time in our lives. We were all very keen for your arrival, but you don't suppose it was simply for the sake of enjoying the first night of your sweet society? Nothing of the kind. It was on account of the ordeal. The ordeal is such fun!"

"Don't mind half she is saying," said Star Lestrange. "But come along, Christian. It is quite true; there is an ordeal, and you must go through it before you can really be what we pride ourselves on being—a Penwernian."

They now turned and went upstairs, past the nice rooms where the girls' bedrooms were located, and up again some narrow stairs, until, having opened an attic door, Christian found herself in a huge attic which ran right across the front of the house. This room had evidently been got ready for a ceremony. Candles in tin sconces were arranged along the wall; each sconce was fastened in its place by a small tack, and as the girls entered a short, very dark, stoutly built girl was going from one to the other lighting them. When the illumination was at last complete, from twenty to thirty candles were burning in the front attic.

Christian had a curious feeling that she was back again in the attic at home. When she got upstairs her fears suddenly left her. She was to be the heroine of probably a very disagreeable adventure, but had she not herself from her earliest days encountered adventures of all sorts in the attic at home? What thrilling moments had not her dolls lived through? What times of ecstasy had been hers when she was Joan of Arc! Oh, that night when she had imagined herself tied to the stake! Had she not really tied herself to the post of the old bedstead, and had she not crowded round her torn pieces of paper, and shut her eyes, and tried to imagine the upward ascent of the flames? Had she not, finally, almost screamed in her agony, for had not real pains taken possession of her, so vivid and intense had been her imagination?

"After all," she said to herself, "I have my body-guard, and they do look faithful, and nothing can be worse than what I lived through in imagination before now."

When Christian's eyes grew accustomed to the gloom she perceived that every single girl in the school, except three or four of the sixth form, was present. They seemed to her to have augmented in numbers, and to be a great deal more than the forty girls she had been told lived at Penwerne Manor. They stood about in groups, and all looked eager and pleased.

Christian noticed that a large wooden bowl had been placed upon the ground almost in the center of the attic, and a little straw chair, of a twisted, crooked, rickety, and decrepit nature, stood within a few feet of the wooden bowl. She herself remained near the door, and she was surprised as she entered the room to notice that Star Lestrange immediately left her and walked right across the attic to the farther end, where she sat down on a turned-up box.

Very soon quick steps were heard running upstairs, and Lucy Norris, looking more smooth and sleek and satiny than ever, joined Star on her box. Jane Price was already standing near, and Angela Goring was the last to arrive. None of the four glanced at Christian, who remained alone, and looking thoroughly miserable, near the door. All of a sudden she felt that she had been subjected to a hoax, and that her bodyguard meant to desert her.

Meanwhile Susan Marsh took her place in the center of the room. She mounted a box, said something to Maud in a low tone, and then Maud took her place by her side.

"All present?" she cried. "Ah, yes! I see. Agnes Temple, stand to one side; you are disgracefully late. Yes, we are all here—all except Louisa Twining, Mary Reid, and Philippa Dawson. Well, the Sixth Form must have its privileges. Now to begin. Who is giving the address to-night? It's your turn, Star, and you are always witty We want something to stir us up; we're a bit dull, I take it. Come along, now. What, you won't?"

"Not to-night," said Star.

"Does that mean that the new girl, the victim, is your special friend?"

Star shook her head.

"Or your special enemy?"

Again the bright head was shaken.

"She's neuter," said Star; "although I mean to see justice done."

"Then it devolves upon me," said Susan, "to open the function. I must explain the rules of the society to the victim. Victim, kindly step forward. Seat yourself in this wriggly arm-chair, fix your eyes on my face, and listen to the words of deep, Solomon-like wisdom that drop from my lips."

Christian dropped into the chair, and the other girls looked at her with amazement and admiration. Many a girl before her had wriggled in agony in that small chair, had blushed and quivered and trembled, but Christian's face was quite calm. She looked full up at Susan and smiled.

Nothing in all the world could have been more discomfiting to Susan Marsh than that smile. It was seen by every single girl in the room, and quite a burst of admiration came from Star Lestrange, Lucy Norris, Jane Price, and Angela. Star clapped her hands, and immediately the whole school took up the clap. This from every girl in the place showed that Christian had made a favorable impression.

"Come, come!" said Susan brusquely, and looking more disagreeable than ever; "this noise is very much against the rules. Even those girls who have lived through the ordeal must not disturb the usual proceedings. Now then, Christian Mitford, your age, please?"

"Thirteen," said Christian.

"When will you have a birthday?"

"In three months' time."

"Mary Hillary, pray note in the archives of this society that the new victim, Christian Mitford, is thirteen years and nine months of age."

Mary, who was standing by a sort of little desk, opened it, took out a paper volume of most disreputable appearance, opened it, made an entry, with a sort of giggle, and then stood silent.

"It is your penalty, Christian Mitford, to put into the wooden bowl that lies at your feet a large caramel, fondant, or chocolate for each month of your life. Who will solve the riddle of the months of Christian Mitford's life?"

Star immediately cried out:

"One hundred and sixty-five months."

"To that great age have you attained, Christian Mitford, and your penalty is that, having lived so long in the world, you must place upon the altar of our friendship a lollypop or other sweet for each of your months. You do this for the good of the community. The penalty is slight, and not at all in accordance with the offense."

"But I can't imagine what the offense is," said Christian suddenly. "As to having lollypops, there is a large box in my bedroom, and you are all welcome to have them if you like."

At this minute Star rose, and turning to Lucy, Jane, and Angela, motioned to them to follow her. The four girls came forward in single file, and each dropped on one knee before Christian and laid a box of chocolates at her feet.

"We are proud to be your ministers on this occasion," said Star, "and we have brought the penalty which you in your ignorance knew nothing about."

"I don't call that at all fair," cried Susan. "We all know that if a girl can't offer the necessary confectionery she has to give another forfeit of a different nature, and that forfeit is often of greater value to the society. But there!" she added, seeing that Star frowned, "if we must submit, I suppose we must. Be thankful to your ministers, therefore, Christian Mitford. Take up the sweets and deposit them in the bowl, but be sure you have the right number. Be sure you have one hundred and sixty-five sweetmeats—one for each month of your life."

Christian took up the boxes and unfastened them. Several girls crowded round as she reckoned them out and placed them in the bowl. Susan stood by counting with her lips as Christian deposited the sweets in their receptacle.

"So far so good," she said. "The fact of your having paid this forfeit exonerates you from other unpleasantnesses which certainly would have been your lot had those four girls, Star Lestrange, Lucy Norris, Jane Price, and Angela Goring, not come to the rescue. But now we have other matters to attend to. You know—or, if you don't know, you must be told—that any girl who comes to Penwerne Manor and doesn't enter into our secret society is outside in every sense of the word. She may be loved by her teachers—such a thing is quite possible—but she certainly will not be loved by the girls. She will not be allowed to share in any of the real conviviality of the school—the secret banquets, for instance. Now, girls, can any of you give a description of what the secret banquets are really like?"

Star jumped to her feet and began to speak eagerly.

"They're very naughty," she said. "They are conducted without our teachers knowing anything about them. They occur once a month—here. We generally assemble about half-past ten at night, and go back to our rooms about half-past eleven. We collect during the month for the expenses of the banquet. Our food is generally brought in by means of a basket and a rope through the attic window. The fun of the thing is to do it secretly. We try not to be too naughty, but we certainly have a gay time."

"It sounds interesting," said Christian, who felt that she could enjoy it; "but does Miss Peacock know?"

"Does Miss Peacock know?" suddenly exclaimed Maud Thompson, raising her voice for the first time, and giving Christian an angry look. "I'd like to see the girl who would tell Miss Peacock. Jessie knows; but then nobody minds Jessie. The other teachers don't know, and I trust never will. Mademoiselle is an old horror. We have to keep it from Mademoiselle, whatever happens."

"Now, you, Christian Mitford, continued Susan, "can, if you like, remain outside the society; but of course you will not."

"No, Christian," said Star; "you must join."

"And having joined, you must adhere to the rules," said Susan. "Now, to make the ceremony of membership of value, we always tattoo a tiny mark on the arm of a new member. We do this with nitrate of silver, a small bottle of which is kept up here. It hardly hurts at all, and if the victim objects——"

"Certainly, if you object, Christian, it is not to be done," said Star; "but," she added, with a laugh, "you had much better submit."

"I don't mind a bit," said Christian. "I have gone through worse things than that," she added.

Susan's eyes brightened and grew suddenly big. She fastened them on the young girl's face.

"I haven't the least doubt," she said, "that you will be an acquisition. You seem to have courage. Some girls get in such a funk."

"But I won't join," said Christian firmly, "until I know what it means."

"It means that we are to stick to each other through thick and thin; that you are never to tell; that when the members of the committee—I am one, Star Lestrange is another, Angela Goring is another, and Janet Bouverie is another—that when we decide on a certain mode of action all the members have to adhere to it. They have to follow in our lead and submit to our dictum. Fresh members are elected on the committee every half-year, and on that day, the ceremony is very important indeed. The girls greatly like the present set—don't you, girls?"

There was a loud cheer, particularly in the neighborhood of Star Lestrange. Susan looked round her and slightly frowned.

"Each member has to subscribe something out of her own private pocket-money once a week to the funds of the society," said Susan; "and if possible she ought to begin with a handsome donation. What can you afford, Christian Mitford? You look as though you had plenty of money. I hope you will be able to put a good sum into the funds."

"A shilling is the usual thing," called out Star across the room.

"It would be better for you to give more," said Susan, gazing at Christian uneasily.

"I will give five shillings."

"Naughty, naughty little t'ing," said Star's ventriloquist voice over Christian's head.

"You really can't be allowed to break the rules in this fashion, even if you are a member of the committee, Star Lestrange," said Susan. "We shall be glad of five shillings, Christian. You don't seem to be such a formidable person nor so badly behaved as I expected. We will now, if you please, perform the ceremony of initiation."

The girls crowded round. Susan came forward.

"On this occasion," she said, "you, Maud Thompson, will perform the ceremony on Christian's arm.

Christian bared her arm, and Maud, with a tiny caustic pencil, wrote the word "Penwernian" in very small letters just above her elbow. The caustic smarted slightly, but the pain was nothing to speak of.

"Now," continued Maud, "you belong to us, Christian Mitford—or at least you very nearly do. You have still to write your name in blood in this book. Don't be startled; just prick your finger. Here's the needle we always use for the purpose. Shall I do it for you?"

Before Christian could reply Maud made a sharp prick on her first finger, and a large drop of blood appeared. The pen was then put into Christian's hand, and she wrote her name in the members' book.

"Now you belong to our secret society," continued Maud. "You know what we know; you do what we do. Through thick and thin you will be faithful to us; through trouble and joy you belong to us. You would sooner have your heart cut into little bits than betray us. Very well, that is all right. Now begins the real pleasure of the evening. Girls," continued Maud, turning and facing the other girls as they crowded round her, "it is permitted, in honor of the new member, that the caramels, fondants, etc., put into that wooden bowl should now be divided. Long life to the new member. Christian, you as fresh member are permitted to eat one month of your life."

"Really," said Christian, laughing, "this sounds very formidable. I don't know that I want to eat away any part of my life."

She thought the ceremony had come to an end, and was rather relieved than otherwise; but her happiness was short-lived, for Susan came over and said calmly:

"Now then, be as quick as you can and give us an account of why you were unavoidably detained. Your unavoidable detention has been the talk of the school for the last fortnight. Now, we want to learn all about you; for understand, it is absolutely necessary that each member of our secret society should have the full confidence of all the other members. The sooner, therefore, you begin to tell us your life's history the better."

CHAPTER XVI

SUSAN MARSH

SUSAN now, with quick, deft movements, removed the candles from their places by the wall, and placed them round the wooden bowl, which no longer contained any fondants, for they had all been devoured by the greedy Penwernians. The candles were arranged in a circle, and the girls were invited to seat themselves in a wider circle just beyond. Christian alone was so placed that the light from the candles should fall on her face.

"Now begin, please," said Susan; "all about your unavoidable detention first. And don't prevaricate; the soul of truth is the leading motive of our society. We scorn to conceal anything; we just speak the simple truth on all occasions."

There was a pause. For a minute it seemed to Christian as though she heard the beating of her own heart. She was quite still, and it was not until a small sharp voice sounded at the back of her ear: "It is the first step that costs"—that she found her voice.

Really Star was too trying, but she had the effect of stimulating the young girl into a terrible effort to control herself.

"I am very much obliged to you all for being so anxious to know about me," said Christian, "and I will tell you about my past life from time to time if you really desire it; but I don't intend to mention why I was kept from school. That is my own secret, and I intend to keep it."

"Naughty new member; that will never do," cried several gay voices.

"Hush!" said Susan in an imperative tone. "We all know what happens when members of this society refuse to obey the committee. But we will speak of that later on. Tell us just what you wish to tell us now, Christian."

"I will tell you a story," said Christian suddenly, "and it's all about myself."

"A story—that's good!" cried Agnes Temple, a look of satisfaction crossing her commonplace little face. "I love stories about people." Then, fixing her eyes on her companion's face, she said, "I like Christian Mitford—don't you?"

"Please don't talk any more in that whisper," suddenly exclaimed Star. "Now then, Christian, we will not compel your confidence to-night. It might have been," she continued, glancing round at her fellows, "anything. It might mean an accident to the head or to the heart, in which case it would be extremely dangerous to press for an explanation. You shall tell us just what you like, Christian," she continued, "only don't draw on your imagination if you can help it."

"What I tell you will be true," answered Christian, "only I don't suppose any of you will believe me. I am an only child. All my days I should have been terribly lonely but for my attic."

"Oh, dear!" cried Maud Thompson; "perhaps she has belonged to other secret societies. She would have been very lonely but for her attic. Please tell us all about your attic."

"I will," said Christian, "if you won't interrupt."

She then proceeded to give a vivid picture of her early days. She described her life so that the girls who listened no longer interrupted with silly words or sarcastic remarks; they were so interested that they forgot themselves. Christian spoke of her doll days, then of her fairy-story days, and last of her heroic days. When she got to the subject of Joan of Arc it seemed to the girls that no history had ever been so thrilling.

"It was one dreadful dark day," she continued, suddenly rising to her feet and forgetting about everything but that picture of the past which was rising up in her mind. "There was snow outside, and I thought and I thought, and it seemed to me that I was Joan and in prison. I thought I would put on the armor which was to be my undoing. I saw myself in it, and I was glad and not at all afraid. And then—and then—there came the trial. Oh! it lasted so long, and I seemed to live through it all. I was condemned to death. I saw myself; I was there. I was burnt, and I did go through it all."

"Oh, nonsense!" here cried Mary Hillary. "Your head must be affected."

"No, no; I did go through it all in imagination," said Christian. "I made it, too, as realistic as possible. There was an old, old bedstead, and one of the posts was broken. I bound myself to the post—yes, with real chains, too; they belonged to a dog we used to keep in a kennel. They were rusty, but that did not matter. And I piled up papers round me, all torn up in great pieces; and I had some red paper to imitate the color of the flames. I made the paper come higher and higher, and I fancied I saw a crowd, and I was burned."

"Oh, dear! you are an extraordinary girl," said Angela Goring. "Don't you think that sort of thing is very bad for you?"

The others were silent. Christian dropped down again on her seat.

"I have no more to tell you to-night," she said. "It takes it out of me to feel like that. I wouldn't tell you, but if we are Penwernians that means that we are comrades—and comrades must understand each other. If you all will be friends with me I will be your friend. Oh, I hope you will; I was a little afraid of you to-day, but I don't really think I will be afraid any longer."

"I, as a member of the committee, declare our meeting is now dissolved," said Star Lestrange suddenly. "It is time for us to go to our bedrooms. Go softly, everyone. Jessie wouldn't tell, but the other mistresses are no end of tell-tale-tits. Good-night, Christian."

"Christian," said Janet Bouverie suddenly, "I'm glad you have come to the school, and I hope you will be friends with me."

A great many other girls came up and shook hands with Christian. She had scored a success. One by one, like little frightened shadows, the Penwernians stole to their separate rooms. Fortunately for Christian, hers was not far off, as the White Corridor was the nearest to the celebrated front attic.

She was glad to see a bright fire burning in the grate, but she started very violently when she saw standing by the fire no less a person than Miss Jessie herself.

"Come in, dear," said Miss Jessie. "I know all about it, of course. If I were a teacher I should be obliged to tell; but I am not a teacher, and dear Lavinia gives me a good deal of liberty. I do not feel that I am obliged to make mischief. As long as you girls keep up your little mystery and don't do anything wrong, I don't feel called upon to make you unhappy. Don't tell me, dear, what has happened; I'd much rather not know. But come to the fire; you look quite blue and cold."

"Oh, in some ways I have had a splendid time," said Christian.

"I am relieved to hear it, my love. To tell the truth, I have been a little anxious about you, Christian."

"Why?" asked Christian.

"Because your face has a strange expression—just as though you felt things too much."

"I am naughtier than most girls; that is why," said Christian.

"My dear child, let me assure you that you are nothing of the kind. I know a lot about girls, living here as I do. Even dear Lavinia can't see them as I do, for they are always on their best behavior with her, and they don't mind little Jessie in the very least. But now, dear, I came to your room on purpose to tell you that your real life here begins to-morrow. You will, like everyone else, have your hardships; you will also have your period of discipline, and I earnestly beg of you, Christian, not for the sake of a purely quixotic motive to get yourself into hot water by telling something which never happened in the school. In regard to this remember, my dear, it is your duty to be guided by the superior judgment of dear Lavinia Peacock."

Christian made no answer. Miss Jessie looked into her eyes.

"You are over-anxious, dear. I trust you will sleep. Is your fire all right? Ah! I see it is. I wish I could give you this little luxury every night, but it is against our rules. We have a fire once a week in each bedroom, just to keep it warm and aired, but that is all. Now I will put on two additional lumps of coal. You will be quite happy, dear. The great gong will wake you at seven o'clock to-morrow morning; you are expected to be down at half-past seven. At eight we have breakfast, and then prayers. You will soon know all the routine. And now, love, good-night."

Christian stood for a few minutes by the fire. It certainly was cheerful, and the little room snug. She felt that she might soon be happy at school. As to being interested, she had never felt so intensely interested before. The girls were so naïve, so fresh. Even those who terrified her aroused her interest. She did not like Susan Marsh, but even Susan had something fascinating about her. Then, as to Star, was anybody ever before so gay, so bright, so willful?

"And she was good to me," thought the child—"really good. She helped me when I was frightened. She showed me how I might take a proper place in the school. I love her already. I shall love her well. How strange it is that I should be supplied with a sort of bodyguard! Star and Lucy and Jane and Angela. I can't say that they did much for me while I was going through the initiation, but still they were there. I suppose they acted rightly in not making their presence too much felt. Star said they were to be a sort of invisible bodyguard, ready to help me in times of real difficulty and danger, but as a rule allowing me to get out of my own scrapes, when I don't absolutely require their assistance."

Christian removed her dress and looked at her arm. It still smarted a little from the initial ceremony.

"How ridiculous all this is!" she said to herself. "Father and mother would smile over it; and yet it didn't seem ridiculous up there."

She wondered what her father would say if he ever heard of that evening's event. Then, having knelt for a minute or two in prayer, she got into bed.

But Christian's adventures for that night were by no means over; for, just as she was getting drowsy and was dropping off to sleep, the door of her room glided open noiselessly, and Susan Marsh stood before her.

"I have come," said Susan, "to say something. I shan't take up much of your time, but I think it only right that you should know. You are sleepy, but you must not go to sleep until I have had my talk out. By the way, what a snug room! And a fire, too. Dear me! do you think you deserve all these luxuries?"

"Certainly, if my parents choose to pay for them," replied Christian.

She found herself speaking in a pert voice, but her heart was beating and the old terrors were returning.

"How grand we are!" said Susan mockingly. "I wonder if the parents know what the dear young only girl is up to. Now, Christian, please note that I am in the position to assure you calmly, simply, but at the same time firmly, that you are in my power."

"I in your power?" said Christian. "What do you mean?"

"This: I happen to know all about that unavoidable detention. I know what it consisted of. I know the full particulars. I know all about that wicked, wicked running away from home, and the name of the little girl who went with you, and the slum where you went, and the room that you slept in, and the reason why you were not allowed to return to the school for ten days. I can tell that story to the whole school; and I will, too, if you don't make it worth my while to be silent."

"I will never make it worth your while to be silent," said Christian. "I can't imagine how you learnt it, but you have learnt it by dishonorable means. Anyhow, I am not going to be afraid of you."

"Aren't you?" said Susan. "There is plenty of firelight; that is a good thing. A fire is nice, and we are quite alone—absolutely safe and comfortable—so we will just argue this matter."

"You may say anything you like," replied Christian very stoutly, "but I am not going to be afraid of you."

Her attitude and manner, and even the look on her face, impressed Susan. She was evidently astonished.

"Why does Miss Peacock say that you were unavoidably detained?" was her next remark.

"You must ask Miss Peacock that yourself," replied Christian.

"Very well; I must now tell you the simple truth, Christian Mitford. You can take whatever attitude you please on this occasion. You may pretend to be indifferent, but you don't know what it means. It lies in your power to tell the school or not."

"That is what I intend to do," said Christian.

"Is it? Well, we'll see. If you do it you will imagine yourself a sort of heroine, no doubt; you will think yourself extremely brave. But wait for the result. How do you think your schoolfellows will take it? You spent the night, for instance, in the slums. We don't any of us—we lady girls who live in this school—know what the slums mean, but you do. Then you were fearfully wicked and disobedient. The girls who are not wicked and who are not disobedient will be afraid of you. In short, I may as well assure you, Christian, if you tell this thing, if it is known in the school, you will be sent to Coventry. Do you know what Coventry means?"

"I have heard of it, but I should like to have your version," said Christian.

"You are very smart and courageous in your conversation now, but you won't be when you feel the full pinch of Coventry life. Just picture to yourself what it will feel like never to be spoken to by your companions, to be without friends in the midst of a lot of girls, to be publicly expelled from the Penwernians."

"Oh, I don't mind that," said Christian.

"You haven't the remotest idea what it means or you wouldn't say so. Your mistresses may continue to like you, but there isn't a good, nice girl in the school who will dare to be seen speaking to you. You will live on here year after year, and not until all the present girls leave the school will you have any chance of becoming popular. Now, naturally you would be popular; you are just the sort of girl. That power of yours of telling stories is an immense attraction. It might win the heart of nearly every girl in the place. But after your sin is known no one will listen to you. And why, do you think? Because the committee of the Penwernians will forbid it. Now, of course, the mistresses have great power in the school; but, although they would not like to own it, their power is nothing at all compared to the power of our secret society. If you, who have just been made a member of it, were at once expelled because of conduct which makes it impossible for us to have anything to do with you, you would be in a sorry position. You can think the thing over. I don't want to press you, but my advice to you is to take advantage of Miss Lavinia Peacock's kindness and not to tell what you have done."

Susan's words came out slowly. She made a pause now and then, and these pauses were very effective. Her ugly face was full of deep shadows in the firelight. Her eyes were scarcely visible at all. It was only her white teeth that gleamed now and then. As she stood she herself made a great shadow, and it seemed to Christian that Susan was a bad girl, and that she hated and, alas! feared her.

"If I could only speak to Star," she thought. "What am I to do?"

"What I say to you is in absolute confidence," continued Susan, who knew that she was at last making an impression. "For your own sake you ought really not to tell. It doesn't matter to me. If you do tell you will find it distinctly—yes, dreadfully—unpleasant. Miss Peacock must have known that fact when she so wisely resolved not to acquaint the girls with the truth."

"But I don't care to live under a lie or to sail under false colors," said Christian slowly.

"You are a little goose," replied Susan; and now she changed both her attitude and manner, and coming close, she laid her hand upon the bed. Christian's hand was lying outside the counterpane, and Susan caught it and held it firmly.

"You are one of us," she said, "and of course we all want to like you. I for one feel that I could adore you. It is because I pity you that I speak."

"But how did you know? It is a secret from the whole school. How did you manage to get possession of it?" said Christian.

"Ah! that is my affair. I can only say now that I am in possession of it, and can give you full particulars of your great adventure. The name of your little runaway friend is Rose Latimer; and another horrid girl called Judith Ford was implicated in the affair. Now, are you satisfied?"

"I see that you know, but I can't make out how you know."

"Be satisfied with that knowledge, for more you will not be told. Now, you have almost made up your mind, have you not, that you will not tell?"

"You have frightened me very much. I will think it over."

"Do, and to-morrow we will meet again. I won't stay with you now, for I know you are sleepy. Of course you will pay me."

"For what?"

"For my silence, dear—my silence. What you give me I shall spend on fondants for the next meeting of the Penwernians. Have you got any money handy?"

Poor Christian! A bright new sovereign lay on the dressing-table. At that very moment Susan's eyes fell upon it.

"Why, here's the very thing," she said. "It will keep me silent for a while. You will be happy and have a right good time, for I can see to that. Thank you so much! Good-night."

She snatched up the money and put it into her pocket.

"No, no; come back, please—come back!" called Christian.

But Susan gave a low laugh and a gesture of warning, and disappeared from the room.

It was long before Christian could sleep. After the relief that the meeting had given her, to come face to face with such a terrible obstacle as Susan Marsh made her feel almost wild with apprehension. She had no one to turn to, for she did not dare to betray Susan. What was to be done?

"If I do the right thing," thought the poor girl, "Susan Marsh will be my enemy, and I dare not tell the mistresses. Oh, I wish—I wish father and mother had never sent me to this terrible school!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE BOUDOIRS

Two or three days after the events related in the last chapter, Susan Marsh might have been seen pacing up and down with her chosen friend Maud Thompson. Maud, compared to Susan, was rather a pretty girl; and under other influences she might have been a good girl. She had taken a fancy to Christian, and was telling Susan of this fact.

"Like her as much as ever you please," said Susan, "but remember she is my prey."

"Your prey, Susan! Whatever do you mean? Sometimes you don't talk at all nicely."

"Lower your voice a little, my love," said Susan; "we don't want the others to hear us. We have a whole quarter of an hour, and I have a plan in my head."

"You always are planning things. But I do want to talk about Christian now. I can't think why you call her your prey."

"Of course, I have no secrets from you, Maud; you are my chosen friend, and would not dare to betray me, even if you wished to do so. But the fact is, I have got hold of the poor dear's secret."

"Christian Mitford's secret?"

"Yes; the true story of her unavoidable detention."

"I wonder she won't tell us about that. She never will. It rather surprises me," said Maud.

"Rest assured, dear Maud, that she is never likely to tell you. She would be a mighty great fool if she did."

"And you know all about it?"

"I know all about it, sweet? Oh, yes."

"You look very queer, Susan. I wish you would not have that——"

"That what, Maudie?"

"That sort of pleasure in seeing people unhappy. It isn't nice."

"Oh, isn't it, Maud? What about the kind friend who gets others out of their troubles. You know——"

"You needn't go into that," said Maud, coloring and then turning white.

"Ah! but I thought I'd just remind you, dear. But to return to our beloved Christian. She really is a very noble specimen of her name—very conscientious and all that—but, notwithstanding, I think we shall get her to do pretty much what we like; and all and entirely by means of that little secret of hers, which she must never tell except to your humble servant."

"But why—why—why?"

"Oh, inquisitive one. Your desires are not to be gratified. But now to turn to other matters. I propose that we shall have a very great feast in the front attic, to which all members of the Penwernian Society are to be invited, on the second Saturday in February. That is exactly one fortnight from now. We must have a real supper, and everything in first-rate style; and Florence Dixie and her two friends, Ethel and Emma Manners, are all to be invited."

"What nonsense! You know quite well we can't invite strangers to the front attic. It is bad enough to have these feasts at all, as it were, in the dark, and with Jessie knowing all the time."

"Jessie will never tell. And don't you know by this time, Maud, that Miss Peacock—the dear, blessed, saintly Lavinia—winks at our little peccadillos? She could find out if she chose to, but she is too wise, bless her, the darling! Well, of course, neither Jessie nor Miss Peacock is to know of this. I have spoken already to Florence Dixie and to the two Manners girls, and they are wild to come. They want to join the society, but of course that can't be entertained; I do draw the line at that. We shall get them in by means of a ladder put up to the window. Won't it be splendid?"

"It certainly will," said Maud. "How daring you are, Susan! Do you think Star and Lucy and Angela will join us?"

"Do I think ducks will swim?" was Susan's remark. "But now, my dear love, in order to have these girls we must have funds. What do you think of this?"

As Susan spoke she thrust her hand into her pocket and drew out a whole beautiful golden sovereign.

"Why, Susan," said Maud, in astonishment, "however did you get it?"

"From the dear, the precious young Christian. The price of her detention, you understand."

"Oh, you are not blackmailing the poor child? How wrong of you! How cruel!"

"You use very ugly words, Maud; you forget yourself. Now, the fewer questions you ask the better. This sovereign will buy a grand supper, and we shall have a jolly time."

"But if we are found out. You know how furious Miss Peacock would be at our introducing outsiders into the school."

"We won't be found out; we shall be far too careful for that. But please understand, Maud, that what I have told you is in strictest confidence; you must not breathe it to another soul. Meanwhile you may be as nice as you like to Christian. Go and talk to her now, poor child! She is standing over there by herself, looking desolate and gazing out to sea."

"I won't go to her," said Maud. "Some of the things you do, Susan, make me wretched. I do wish you'd be straight and nice and honorable like Star. I am sure she has no end of fun in her, and is most daring, but she would never stoop to your sort of things."

"Really, Maud, I don't know what to make of you. If you go on like this I shall have to get some other girl to be my special friend; and then, dear little love, look out for squalls, for don't you remember——"

Susan bent and whispered into Maud's tiny, shell-like ear. Maud colored.

"Go and look up your lessons," continued Susan, pushing her away with a contemptuous motion; "your French was not specially creditable to-day. I will approach Christian and have a chat with her."

Maud ran off at once. Susan looked after her. Susan's overhanging brows gave a decided scowl to her face.

She approached Christian Mitford softly, and when she came within a short distance, said in a mincing voice, and in the tone of a person drawling out a hymn:

"Come hither, little Christian,
And hearken unto me;
I'll tell you what the daily life
Of a Christian child should be."

Christian turned at once angrily. "I don't want to speak to you," she said.

"But you must, love; you really must. We are going to have such a lovely time in the attic on Saturday fortnight—the best we ever had—and you are to be present, and we are all to wear our white dresses. We will look like so many cherubs, won't we? And there's to be *such* a supper—got out of your sovereign, darling."

"Susan, I can't give you any more money. I only had two sovereigns when Miss Neil left me; she said they were to last until——"

"How long, dearest? Until you ran away again?"

"Oh, don't!" said Christian. "How cruel you are! I have almost made up my mind——"

"What, Christian? To what have you made up your mind?"

"That I won't stand this. It would be much—much braver to me to tell. I'll consult Star; she will know how to advise me."

Now, this was the very last thing that Susan wished. Although she was quite certain that she herself could so manage matters as to send Christian to Coventry if she did tell, she also knew that if Star discovered the truth, she (Susan) would be the person reduced to that uncomfortable position.

"It would be madness for you to tell Star," she said, changing her tone to one of great sympathy. "She's a very upright, honorable sort of girl; she would be shocked—absolutely shocked."

"Are you sure? She always seems so kind; although of late somehow she has not taken much notice of me."

Susan laughed. "Take my advice," she said, "and keep your own counsel. Tell no one except your own Susy, who, of course, won't repeat anything. I have nearly done getting what money I want from you; and isn't it better to be a little short of funds than to be hated by everybody? Come, now; let's take a walk and have a cozy-pozy time together."

Susan's "cozy-pozy time" was scarcely enjoyed by Christian, who was learning to dislike her companion more and more day by day. The young girl often wondered at the intense feeling of hatred that was growing up in her heart for this disagreeable and wicked girl.

"How little I knew when I ran away what it would all mean!" thought the poor child. "Oh, dear! if only father and mother were in England I might consult them. But there is no one—no one to go to for help."

Susan did not find her companion very agreeable, and after informing her of this fact in no flattering terms, ran off to seek more congenial friends.

The girls always had an hour to themselves in the early part of the afternoon, when they might do exactly as they liked. They need not walk, they need not study; they might wander in the grounds, or they might sit by the comfortable schoolroom fires, or they might visit the boudoirs.

Amongst the special attractions to be found at Penwerne Manor were the boudoirs. These consisted of a number of small rooms, beautifully furnished, very bright, very cheerful, and specially devoted to the girls of the school. Each class had a room to itself, but a girl belonging to one class could invite a friend to have tea with her in another boudoir or classroom, provided the invitation was given for this special hour. At other times each class was expected to keep strictly to its own boudoir.

Christian had long rejoiced in the fact that she was in the same class as Star Lestrange, and equally was she delighted to know that Susan, a much bigger and older girl, was two classes lower down in the school.

Susan would never have dreamt of bullying so clever a girl as Christian but for the rare chance of having discovered her secret.

Feeling cold and chilly now, the young girl crossed the wide hall, went down the corridor where the boudoirs were situated, and opened the door of the fourth class boudoir and entered. This room went by the name of the Hall of Good Nature. It was one of Miss Peacock's curious fancies to call the boudoirs after virtues; Charity Hall, Hope Hall, Kindness Hall, were to be found in the little group. The name of each room was carved in white over the lintel of the door, and now as Christian entered she raised her eyes to look at the words.

"The Hall of Good Nature," she said to herself.

She uttered a deep sigh. She wondered if there was any real kindness left in the world. She felt trrribly lonely and depressed. But for Susan, and but for her own wrong-doing, how happy she would be here! For she could not help confessing to herself that the life was beautiful; all its days were planned out with such true common-sense and such broad ideas with regard to all that was necessary for the growth of young and sensitive girls, that happiness could not but be the result. There were strong interests, too, in the school, and Miss Lavinia herself was so delightful that to obtain a kind word from her or a smile from her face was sufficient incentive for any amount of hard work.

But Christian was not happy. She was doing well; her lessons were a mere nothing to her. But for the sake of Star she would have made violent efforts to get into the fifth class, but she liked Star and did not wish to leave her. Nevertheless, strange as it may seem, Star took very little notice of her of late; she rather avoided her than otherwise, and this seemed the last drop in Christian's cup of bitterness.

She was thinking now of all these things, puzzling over them, and wiping away a tear which would now and then start to her eyes, when the door was opened somewhat noisily, and Star Lestrange, accompanied by Angela Goring, dashed into the room.

"Oh, bother!" she said aloud when she saw Christian, and then she stopped short and was about to go away.

But Christian rose quickly.

"Don't go, please, Star," she said. "I was resting just for a minute or two; I am all right now. I will go and have a walk round the grounds before lesson-hour."

"But you mustn't; it is so cold," said Angela. "Why, what is the matter, Christian?"

For Angela had caught sight of Christian's face, and had noticed the large tear-drop on her cheek which rolled down and disappeared even as she spoke.

"I'm all right, really. Please don't go away," said Christian. "Why shouldn't you stay?"

Star suddenly changed her mind.

"You belong to us, Chris, don't you?"

"I thought so—I hoped so," was Christian's answer.

There was a note of hope in her voice.

"We have been rather puzzled about you, all the same," said Star, sinking into a chair and spreading out her hands to the blaze. "Angel, sit down by my side and warm yourself, pet. We have been rather amazed that you have taken up with Susan Marsh. Don't you know——Oh, of course, I mustn't say a word; it wouldn't be gentlemanly; and whatever happens, I *will* be a gentleman. I'd hate to be a lady. A gentlemanly girl is my ideal of the perfect girl, and I hope I am that, so I won't speak against a schoolfellow. But, all the same, she's not your sort—not really."

"I know. Do you think I like her?"

"Actions speak louder than words, my dear. You are with her always, sniggering in corners, and looking so mysterious; her hand in yours, and her arm round your waist. Faugh! it makes me sick. Doesn't it you, Angel?"

"Perhaps Christian can explain," said Angela, who had a very kind face and read trouble in Christian's eyes.

"Do explain, Chris; there's a darling," said Star. "We want to be nice to you, both Angel and I, but we can't cotton to your friend, and that's a fact. Now tell us, why do you go with her? Why are you always following her about, or she following you about? You are so absolutely unlike the sort of girl who ought to be with her that it is more or less the talk of the school. You'll tell us, won't you?"

"I'm afraid, I can't. I wish I could."

"Oh, then——" Star's sweetness suddenly left her. She became her old, somewhat severe, satirical little self once more.

"She won't be bold and tell us, the charming young thing!" she sang out, letting her voice drop from the ceiling almost into Christian's ears.

"Oh, Star, can't you understand? I am unhappy. Oh! I daren't say another word; only the fact of your not liking me makes me miserable. I was never away from home before. Do be kind to me, Star."

"I will if you tell me the truth; but I won't if you keep up the mystery. So now you can choose. Give me your confidence and I'll get you out of your worries, whatever they are."

Just at that minute a head was poked round the curtain and the face of Susan Marsh appeared.

"Wherever have you hid yourself, Christian? You are wanted immediately. Maudie and I and Mary Hillary are all waiting for your Royal Highness."

"Come in, Susan," said Star suddenly.

Susan advanced into the room. Notwithstanding all her would-be indifference, there was a slightly alarmed expression in her eyes.

"You have done something to this poor girl," said Star. "You have frightened her, and we want her to tell us. It is most unaccountable your being friends with the sort of girl Christian Mitford is."

"What?" said Susan; "is she too good for me?"

"She is different from you," said Star boldly. "She isn't a bit your sort, and you know it. Why are you so chummy with her? Will you tell us the reason?"

"She had best tell you herself; I give her leave," said Susan.

She stood and faced Christian with a daring, impish expression on her face. Her eyes beneath their thick brows seemed to dart as though they would pierce through the young girl's soul; their expression was altogether too much for Christian.

"I can't tell," she said. "I suppose it is all right. I'll go with you, Susan, if you want me."

"Yes, you had better," said Star rudely, "for we don't care for the Susan Marsh sort of girls here."

CHAPTER XVIII

"I AM AFRAID"

"JESSIE," said Miss Lavinia Peacock, turning to her little friend, "I want you to sit here, to make yourself thoroughly comfortable, and allow me to question you freely."

"But, please, dear Miss Peacock——"

"I gave you leave to call me Lavinia."

"Please, dear Lavinia——"

"You would rather not be questioned?"

"I would much, much rather not. You understand that in my position. Oh, yes, you gave me permission, as you expressed it, to be eyes behind your back, to do what I could to make comfort and happiness in the school, and yet to allow a certain amount of liberty. You gave me to understand—you really did, Lavinia—that I might shut my eyes when there was no real mischief ahead."

"I certainly did do so," replied Miss Lavinia gravely; "and I have no intention of going back on my word. Amongst so many girls one must expect differences of disposition. There will always be the girl of varieties; there will always be the thoughtless, heedless, mischievous girl. Now, I have sympathy with the variety girl, and with the daring, the ambitious, the frolicsome, the mischievous girl; but I have no sympathy—none whatever—with the wicked girl. And if such a girl is in this school, and is exercising her malign influence upon my pupils, out she goes. You must clearly understand that you allow no liberty when the wicked girl appears on the scene."

"But I am certain—I am quite positive—that there is no such girl in the school," said poor Miss Jessie, who, although she did not like Susan Marsh, could not be brought to think her anything but just a thoughtless, rather daring specimen of humanity; not exactly a nice girl, but as to being wicked!—oh no, poor little Miss Jessie could not even entertain the idea.

"I promise you," she said after a pause, "that if thre is anything wrong I will let you know. For the rest you must trust me."

"What about the front attic?" said Miss Peacock suddenly.

"You allowed me liberty with regard to that. Nothing goes on that I don't know of. If there is anything distinctly disobedient, any act of open rebellion, I promise that you shall be told at once."

"All right, Jessie," said Miss Peacock with a sigh.

She rose as she spoke, and going up to the glowing fire, put a pretty pointed foot on the brass fender and warmed it luxuriously.

"I cannot exactly tell you why," she said at last slowly, "but since that young girl, Christian Mitford, came to the school—it is nearly a month now since she arrived—I have not felt quite at my ease. There is something about the child that haunts me quite uncomfortably. Are you sure she is happy?"

"I am not," said Miss Jessie.

"But why should she be unhappy?"

"I can't exactly tell you, except——" Miss Jessie sat very still for a minute. "I do hope one thing, and that is that you will strongly dissuade Christian from telling the school at large about her adventure before she came here."

Miss Peacock was silent.

"I am absolutely sure," continued Miss Jessie, "that you would be doing the child irretrievable mischief and injury by allowing the story to get abroad in the school. Schoolgirls are only schoolgirls; they cannot read motives, and they cannot judge of the depth of repentance. To these carefully nurtured, carefully brought-up children the story of Christian's running away and of losing herself, if only for a few hours, in the slums of London would seem altogether horrible. Her repentance would quite fade from their view in comparison with the enormity of her sin. The fact is this, dear Miss Peacock, and I know I am right"—here Miss Jessie's eyes filled with tears—"the good girls of the school would turn away from Christian, and the naughty and troublesome ones would render her life a burden to her. She would never hear the last of her sin. You oughtn't to do it. I am sure—I am certain I am right."

"You go a little too far, Miss Jones," said Miss Peacock. Over her face there swept a wave of resolution, mixed with pain.

Jessie looked as though someone had struck her. To be called "Miss Jones," and by that beloved voice!

"You make a mistake in counseling me. I yield to you in a great deal, but in matters of conduct I am paramount. It is my intention to counsel Christian Mitford to *tell*, and for that reason I am going to see her to-night."

"Oh, it will be cruel! I cannot help saying it," continued Miss Jessie, and she burst into tears.

Miss Peacock laid her hand on the other's shoulder.

"Dear," she said, "I don't wish to be unkind, but is this your school or mine?"

"Oh, yours, of course. Oh, I mustn't say a word, but

I think every teacher in the place would agree with me."

"Have you talked this matter over with the teachers?"

"No, indeed; not a soul knows at present except myself. Poor Christian! she often looks so pale and distressed. She is practically an orphan; her parents are so far off."

"I will deal with her, Jessie; but when a girl has common sense and also a brave and noble thought, I will not have it crushed because of any possible tyranny on the part of the schoolgirls. Send Christian to me now, and believe that I will act for the best."

Miss Jessie went out of the room. She walked very slowly; she felt thoroughly unhappy. She certainly did not agree with Miss Peacock. Christian's manner, the expression on her face, her want of appetite, and her lack of interest in her daily life had been remarked on with great fear and distress by Miss Jessie. She could not guess at the truth, however, for she little suspected that Susan Marsh knew poor Christian's story.

Christian was sitting by herself in the boudoir belonging to the fourth class. She was sitting by a table, a book open before her. Whether she was reading it or not Miss Jessie could not guess. But when she said, "Christian, you are wanted," the young girl jumped up, and then Miss Jessie saw, with a start, that the storybook was upside down.

Christian must indeed be in trouble.

"Oh, my darling!" said Miss Jessie.

Before the girl could prevent her, she ran up to Christian, flung her arms round her neck, and kissed her impulsively several times.

"Christian, I am with you in everything. Be brave, dear; keep up your courage."

"What does this mean?" said Christian. "Has anything happened? Oh, Miss Jessie, you are good to me."

"I try to be, darling, for I love you. The fact is—don't be frightened, but Miss Peacock wants you. You are to go to her at once. I hope and trust this may—— I mustn't—I daren't say any more."

"I am very glad that I can see Miss Peacock," said Christian.

Her tone was bright. She did not wait to say another word to Miss Jessie, but left the room.

Christian's tap at Miss Peacock's door was answered immediately by that good lady.

"Come in," she said; and when she saw the young girl, and noticed her pale face, she said in a particularly kind tone:

"Come here, Christian dear. You and I must have a cozy chat. I like to know all I possibly can of my pupils. Sit in that easy-chair. Is it too near the fire? Well, here is a screen. Now I will take this chair, and we shall enjoy ourselves."

Christian smiled. "Your room reminds me of mother's boudoir at home."

"Ah! I should like to know about your mother. You love her very, very much?"

"I feel being parted from her," said Christian somewhat evasively.

"And your father? What sort of man is he?"

"I think he is very noble," answered Christian; and now her eyes brightened and the color came into her cheeks.

"I rather guessed he must be, Christian. I felt certain that your people must be of the very best. Your father ought to have the highest morals, for he has inherited them. You have a wonderful likeness to your grandmother. Whenever I see you I seem to be back in the old days when I loved her so truly."

Christian gave a restless sigh.

"I shall never be like my grandmother," she said after a pause.

"But why so, dear? Why shouldn't you be just as great and noble? Believe me, Christian," continued Miss Peacock, "these days are the grandest days women ever lived in. The woman of to-day can be anything; she can dare anything. She has splendid opportunities; all doors to the highest and best work are flung open to her. Riches need not retard her, nor poverty. The girl of the present day ought to be educated right nobly in order to meet that grand future."

"I do not care for the girls of the present day," said Christian.

"But do you know many of them?"

"I know some of the girls here."

Miss Peacock looked very attentively at her young pupil; then she stretched out her hand and rang the bell. A servant appeared.

"Bring tea, Agnes—tea for two—and those special cakes that I like."

The maid withdrew, and returned in a few minutes to lay on the little table a lovely silver tea-equipage and the most charming, dainty china Christian had ever seen. By and by the tea itself appeared. Miss Peacock poured out a cup for her pupil and another for herself. Christian ate the cakes and drank the hot, fragrant tea, and, it must be owned, felt comforted.

"You like coming to tea with me, do you not dear?"

"Oh, very, very much!"

"I think you and I could be good friends, Christian."

"If I knew I was worthy we could be good friends—at least I could love you," said Christian.

Her eyes brightened perceptibly and the color deepened in her cheeks.

"Well, now, my dear," said Miss Peacock, "I want you and I to be friends. There are some girls here who seem to be specially in touch with me. There are others, again, most excellent girls—splendid, brave, devoted to their work and their duties—with whom I have nothing in common. That is always the way in life: certain characters appeal to us; others, again, fail to do so. You and I are beyond doubt in touch."

"Oh, thank you!" said Christian in a fervent voice.

"I take an immense interest in your career, Christian. You seem to me, after a fashion, to be left to me as a sort of legacy. I should like you to confide in me; I see plainly that you are unhappy."

Christian bent her head.

"Will you tell me all about it?"

The bent head was slightly shaken.

"You cannot?"

"I cannot."

"*Noblesse oblige* forbids?"

"Yes, yes; perhaps so. Anyhow, I cannot tell you. Don't notice me, please, Miss Peacock. Let me be happy during my short time with you."

"I want you to be happy, and in the best possible way, by removing the cause of your trouble; for I can see, and so can Jessie—and so, I fancy, can many of your companions—that you are not happy, Christian. I am about to write to your father, and I should like to be able to tell him with truth that his dear daughter feels at home with me, and is preparing for that noble womanhood which he has set his heart on her possessing."

The expression of Christian's face changed; the softness went out of it. She kept staring straight before her.

"We agreed, did we not, Christian," said Miss Peacock, "not to say anything with regard to the special trouble which took place before you came to Penwerne Manor?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Before you came, I must own that I was as much distressed at the thought of the other girls knowing as at the grave misdemeanor itself. I resolved not to tell the girls. To my astonishment, you, Christian, begged of me to allow you to tell all the school exactly what had happened. Neither Jessie nor I approved of the plan, knowing, as we do, what schoolgirls are—how they love to tease, to torment and worry, sometimes even to bully. I can scarcely think that any girl in my school would willfully bully another, but of course I am not sure."

Miss Peacock looked hard at Christian as she spoke; but Christian's face, now absolutely pale, revealed nothing.

"The final arrangement was that you were to tell, if you still wished it, at the end of a month. The month has expired; you are now at liberty to stand with me before the entire school and tell your story. And when your story is finished, I am at liberty to tell the school why I counseled you to keep it a secret, and how much I admire your bravery in revealing it. Thus I stand between you and the school as a shield. I put the school on its honor not to worry you, not to reproach you, not to bring up the past. That is the present position. Are you still of the same mind, Christian? Do you wish to take the bull by the horns—to once and for all explain to the school what you have done? Would not this, after all, be the best way out of your troubles?

To each noble heart in the school your conduct must appeal, and each girl worth anything must love you all the better for your courage."

When Miss Peacock had finished speaking, Christian rose and stood before her mistress, and said in a low voice:

"And you now counsel me to tell?"

Miss Peacock looked at her thoughtfully.

"I do," she said. "Yes, on the whole, I emphatically do."

Christian did not speak at all for a minute; then she said:

"When do you wish me to tell?"

"Ah, my dear, you do not take a right tone," said her governess. "This is not a question of *when;* it is a question of *your own desire.* Is it your own desire?"

"I will be—guided by you."

"But is it your desire?"

"It is not my desire any longer."

"Then, Christian, something has happened."

Christian was silent.

"You would rather keep this thing to yourself?"

"Yes."

"But why this change in your views?"

"I was brave—yes, I think I was; now I am afraid."

"Afraid! You have not the face of a coward."

"I am afraid," continued Christian.

"You would rather the thing was unknown, buried, forgotten?"

"You told the school that I was unavoidably detained: let them continue to believe this."

"But you are not happy."

"Cowards are never happy. May I say good-night now, Miss Peacock?"

Miss Peacock drew the young girl towards her.

"What am I to do with you, Christian? You make me unhappy by your present attitude. Is it possible that you will not confide in me? What can I do to make you give me your confidence?"

"I can never give you my confidence. The only thing you can do—the only really kind thing—is to let me alone. I am not a good girl any longer, and I am a coward; and I will not tell, for it isn't in me to do anything brave or noble."

"Then you are very unlike your grandmother."

"I am sorry for poor—father. Miss Peacock, I daren't stay another minute."

Christian struggled to get away, but Miss Peacock drew her still closer.

"Some day," she said, "you may feel like telling me. When that day comes I will give you my careful attention—my undivided attention—and my most lenient judgment. Do you understand?"

"Yes; you are good."

"If your trouble becomes unbearable you will know, therefore, whom to appeal to."

"Oh, you are very good!"

"I see you will say no more now. Well, good-night, dear; I can at least pray for you."

Christian left the room.

CHAPTER XIX

DAWSON'S BILL

Star was pacing up and down in one of the corridors when Christian went past. Star called out when she saw her:

"Christian, are you using your Greek history to-night?"

"No."

"Will you lend it to me? I can't find my own copy."

"Oh, yes, with pleasure, Star. Shall I fetch it for you?"

"No; just tell me where it is and I'll get it."

"In the bookcase in front of my desk. I put it there this afternoon. It is on the third shelf."

"Thanks awfully," said Star. "What are you doing with yourself?"

"I am going to Susan; she asked me to have cocoa with her to-night."

It was one of the privileges of Penwerne Manor that the girls who slept in the White Corridor could entertain their friends now and then to cocoa. This was really anticipating their Girton or Newnham days; but for girls who were in their teens Miss Peacock was of the opinion that such privileges were good instead of harmful.

Christian ran on, therefore, in the direction of Susan's room. Star turned to Angela Goring, who happened to be walking with her when they met Christian.

"How queer she looked!" said Star.

"Do you know," replied Angela, "I am quite certain that something extraordinary is going to happen at the next meeting of the Penwernians. I can't quite make out what it is. I suspected it for some time, but when I found Susan slipping in at the back-door with a great brown-paper parcel in her hand I thought it was time to interfere.

"'Have you been shopping?' I said. 'You know we are not allowed to shop by ourselves.'

"'Old Betty, the cake-woman, gave me this,' said Susan.

"I dare say she did. It was a very big parcel. Of course it found its way to the front attic. I often wonder if we do ourselves any good by belonging to the Penwernians."

"Yes, we do. Don't be so goody-goody, Angela," cried Star. I wouldn't do anything dishonorable, or what our darling Miss Peacock didn't approve of, for the whole world; but there's no harm in having a bit of a lark once a fortnight or so. Of course, I wouldn't regularly break the rules; but where Miss Jessie doesn't interfere, I must confess I feel my own conscience quite light. Now come along; I want to work up a little piece of Greek history. I don't half know the particulars of that famous trial of Socrates, and Professor French does so pounce on you when you happen to make a mistake."

The girls entered the classroom where the fourth class had their lessons. Star approached Christian's bookshelf, took down Grote's *History of Greece*, and getting into a comfortable corner, opened it lazily. Angela approached her own desk, turned on the electric light and prepared to get her French exercise into as perfect order as she could.

Presently a cry from Star smote on her ears.

"Why, do look!" she said.

"What?" asked Angela.

"Oh! come here, Angela; this is too funny. See what I found in Christian's book."

As Star spoke she held up a sheet of paper. On it was written a whole list of eatables, which Star proceeded to read aloud:

"Twelve plum-tarts, twelve apricot-tarts, twelve cheese-cakes, two dozen sponge-cakes, four dozen sponge-fingers, one plum-cake, twenty-four bottles of ginger-beer, two pounds of mixed sweets."

These different items, jotted down one below the other, had their prices put against them, and the grand total amounted to nine and sixpence. There was a scrawled "Paid" put below the little account, and Star, peering down at it with her bright eyes, saw the stamp belonging to a well-known grocer in the town.

"How strange," she said. Christian buying a whole lot of things for herself at Dawson's? Certainly neither Miss Peacock nor Jessie knows anything of this. What can it mean?"

"Oh, I know very well what it means," said Angela. "You rather crushed me just now when I spoke, but I am certain there are going to be high-jinks at the next meeting of the Penwernians. I am also sure there will be an open act of disobedience. This seems to confirm it."

"But think of Christian being mixed up with it," said Star. "Why, it's scandalous. Christian, of all people, buying a lot of food and smuggling it in. We always have been allowed to get a few sweets or chocolates when we pleased, but it was also an understood matter that we were never to have regular feasts in the house. And one of our best-understood rules is this: we are not to buy things from the tradespeople. Nine-and-sixpence worth. Dear me! Christian must be running through her money very fast."

"She had two pounds when she first came," said Angela. "I know it, for she mentioned it; but when I asked her on Saturday last if she would lend me sixpence until my pocket-money was paid, she got that dreadful bright crimson all over her face, and then said, 'I am ever so sorry, but I haven't got it.'"

"What nonsense!" said Star. "It strikes me it is our duty is to look into this. Of course, Susan is at the bottom of it. But what a weak girl Christian must be! I am terribly disappointed in her."

"What are you going to do with that account?" asked Angela.

"Put it into my pocket and confront her with it," said Star. "She won't escape me. I shall know the truth before I am twenty-four hours older."

Angela said nothing further. She went back to her interrupted work; and Star, folding the little account into small compass, slipped it into her purse, and then resumed her study of the trial of Socrates.

The girls said nothing more with regard to this discovery; but the next day, as they were busy over their customary studies, Star from time to time watched Christian. Whatever Chrisian's faults might be, she was certainly a splendid student. She always mastered her lessons in that intelligent way which so delights all teachers. Her object was progress—progress at any cost. When such is the case a girl becomes delightful to teach, and those who have charge of her education give her every advantage.

Christian was already, in the opinion of some of the girls, made too much of by her teachers and by the professors.

She worked hard now, and when the time came for the history and literature lessons she acquitted herself with her customary brilliance. The literature lesson that day was particularly interesting. It related to the trial of Socrates. It was the custom of the professor to get one girl to give a description of the lesson. To-day it was Christan's turn. Wildly enthusiastic over the greatness of the theme, she acquitted herself so magnificently that she even won the unwilling praise of Star herself. Star could never feel enthusiastic about those who were dead and gone; but Christian, as she spoke, was living back again in the ancient times. She was with the marvelous old philosopher in the market-place at Athens: she was one of those Athenian youths who crowded around him to listen to his teaching. It seemed to her that she saw the great Socrates as she spoke. There he was, harsh, ugly, forbidding, as far as exterior went; but, oh! the magical power of his voice, the thrilling sympathy in his words, the tenderness with which he addressed those who listened to him. It seemed to Christian Mitford that morning that she lived in that far-gone time. Her voice broke as she related the end of the famous trial—the reply of Socrates when he was asked what change he would wish in the sentence of death—the scorn of his words, the indignation of his judges. Finally she told of the moment when he drank the cup of hemlock and sank away into the arms of death, one of the greatest men that ever lived.

"Thank you," said Professor French. His eyes were shining as he listened to Christian's words.

Now she returned to her seat. Her eyes shone. Star, as she watched her, could not but admire; but she also pitied.

Christian was just about to put her Greek history-book in its place on the shelf when something arrested her attention. She opened the book quickly, turned page after page, and finally shook it, as though by that means she might find what she sought. Star drew close to her.

"Have you lost anything?" she asked.

"Yes, but it doesn't matter."

"Professor Munro, young ladies," called the voice of an English teacher, and another professor entered the room.

A new lesson proceeded, and again Christian scored.

Between eleven and twelve came the welcome hour of recess, and it was then that Star went up to her classmate.

"Aren't you very proud of yourself?" she asked.

"I?" answered Christian. "Certainly not."

"Then you ought to be. I never cared for poor old Socrates before. I thought it so tiresome that a man who lived so far back should still be able to worry the girls of the twentieth century. I didn't think it at all necessary to learn about him."

Christian made no reply.

"But you have made him live. Oh, how you spoke, and how your eyes shone!"

"I was interested," said Christian briefly.

Her tone annoyed Star, who began to speak less kindly.

"I wonder," she said, "if what you couldn't find when the Greek history lesson was over has got, in some strange manner, into my possession. You looked for something?"

"Yes; I put a mark in the place, and the mark was gone."

"A piece of paper?"

"Yes."

"Had it any writing on it?"

"Some items. Do you think it could be found?"

Star took out her purse, opened it, and held up the paper a few feet from Christian.

"Twelve plum-tarts," she began, "twelve apricot-tarts, twelve cheese-cakes——"

"Oh, don't go on! That paper is mine," said Christian. She turned very red. "Give it to me," she continued; "I want it."

"Of course you want it," replied Star; "but if you have no objection, I think I will just keep it."

"But why should you, Star? It's mine; please, give it to me." Christian's voice became full of distress.

"I am ever so sorry, dear, but really I don't think I can, I want it. I won't show it to anyone, of course, but I want to keep it, just as a little piece of evidence. Christian, do you know what you are doing?"

"I know quite well."

"Don't you realize that you are disobeying one of the most severe rules of the school?"

"Yes, I know."

"Did you buy those things at Dawson's?"

"You have no right to question me."

"But did you?"

"Yes."

"Out of your own money?"

"Certainly."

"You knew you were disobeying?"

"I did."

"What does this mean, Christian?"

"I can't tell you. Think of me as you please. If you show what you found when I kindly lent you my history book, you will be the meanest girl on earth."

"I am certainly not that; but you had better beware, for if you suppose that Susan's ways, and Mary Hillary's ways, and Maud Thompson's ways, and—oh, that I should have to say it!—your ways are going to be tolerated by the better class of girls in this school, you are mistaken. It is within your power to give a very serious warning to Susan; for we girls who like our fun, and yet are not really disobeying the mistresses, are in the preponderance, whatever you may think."

CHAPTER XX

NOBLESSE OBLIGE

The elder girls of the school retired to their rooms at half-past nine. They were all expected to be in bed by ten, when Jessie went round, just opening the door of each room, peeping in, saying, " Good-night, dear," and shutting it again.

On the night that Star had shown Christian Dawson's bill, Christian went to her room as usual. The luxuries of the first days of her residence at Penwerne Manor were quite at an end. The girl stood for a minute by a window that was partly open. From there she caught a glimpse of the rolling waves of the great Atlantic as they burst in magnificent spray upon the shore. She saw the outlines of the great rocks, and farther out the solitary spark of the bell-light at sea attracted her attention. The moon was coming up in the heavens; the sky was cloudless. Christian was very susceptible to the power of Nature. Nature had ever a keen and telling voice for her. Now no smile passed over her face, no look of pleasure. She dropped the curtain and turned aside.

" I am glad the sky is clear; it makes it a little less terrible," she said to herself; and then, without undressing, she lay down between the sheets and covered herself well up.

By and by Jessie's feet coming along the corridor were distinctly heard. She opened door after door, and her cheerful " Good-night, dear," or " Sleep well, my love," sounded like the note of a watchman. Christian's door was open wide; Jessie advanced a foot or two into the room.

"Are you in bed, Christian?"

"Yes."

"Are you comfortable, darling?"

"Yes, thank you, Jessie."

"Then good-night, dear; sleep well."

"Thank you, Jessie; good-night."

The door was shut, and Miss Jessie trotted downstairs. She called the girls of the White Corridor her own special babies, and of them all she loved Christian the best. She could not tell exactly why, but the young girl had found a place in her heart from the very first.

Christian lay quiet for the best part of half an hour; then she rose very softly, and taking up a somewhat heavy basket which she had placed under the bed, crept step by step towards the door. She had managed in the daytime to oil the lock, and it now opened without the least sound. When she got into the corridor the moonlight filled the place with a white radiance; and standing there, as though waiting for her, were Susan Marsh, Maud Thompson, and Janet Bouverie. Susan gave her a nod of approval, and going on in front, approached the stairs which led to the front attic. They all went up in single file, sometimes, notwithstanding every effort, stepping on a creaking board. They reached the door of the attic. Susan took a key out of her pocket, unlocked it, and they entered.

Susan then made certain preparations. She lit three or four candles, not by any means making the illumination which had taken place on the night of Christian's initiation. She drew forward a chair for herself, and an old wooden box turned upside down and one or two stools for her companions.

"Now, Christian," she said briskly, "the contents of the basket, please."

Christian held out the basket without a word.

"Oh, my dear child," said Susan, "how glum you are!—not at all the cheerful sort of companion we want. You have invited us here to a feast——"

"No, I haven't," said Christian, finding her voice.

"You haven't! What an absolutely extraordinary girl, when you bought all those nice things in the basket with your own money! Here we are, prepared to be ever so sweet to you, and ever so grateful, and to demolish at least part of them. Maud, what do you say to a girl who brings up a basketful of tuck and then says she *hasn't* brought it up? It's a contradiction in terms, isn't it, Maud?"

"Very much so; but why should we quarrel with mere words?" said Maud. "The thing is that Christian has arrived on the scene with a very delicious feast, and we are all dying to set our teeth in some of those cakes. Oh, don't they smell good!"

"You can open the basket," said Christian, "and eat as many as ever you like, Maud; and so can you, Susan; and so can you, Janet."

"Come," said Susan, "do get out of your sulks, Christian. Well, if you won't, we shall enjoy our feast, however unwillingly it is given to us. Now then, for goodness' sake, new Penwernian, arrange the goodies on this table and let us fall to."

Christian immediately went on her knees and took the paper packets from the basket. Opening these, she displayed some cheese-cakes, tarts, and other good things. A number of ginger-beer bottles were next brought forward, and Susan, who complained of a furious thirst, suggested that they should regale themselves with one apiece. A small tin can was therefore filled, and the girls drank in turns. They declared that they were famished, and thought Christian's feast nectar and ambrosia.

"Isn't it wonderful how nice it is to be naughty?" said Susan. "Don't you think so?"

"Scrumptious!" cried Maud.

"For instance," continued Susan, "don't we all go nearly mad with delight over this stolen supper, and yet our bread and cheese and cocoa were scarcely touched an hour and a half ago downstairs?"

"I wasn't hungry then," said Christian, "and I'm not hungry now."

"Oh, you are a kill-joy!" exclaimed Susan. "I only wish it had fallen to the lot of some other girl to be blessed with a little money, and we would have sent you to Coventry long ago."

"If you'd only let me alone you might have all my money," said Christian suddenly.

"Hush, hush!" exclaimed Maud. "You do talk nonsense, Christian. And, Susan, I must say you worry the poor child a good bit. Now then, let us put away the rest of the delicious food. We shall have enough here for to-morrow night, and many nights after. That's a good thing, for we shall have to come up to the attic pretty often to arrange about our great feast."

"Which takes place exactly this day week," said Susan. "Well, Christian, we are very much obliged to you, and you have a vote of thanks from the entire party. We shall expect a little further money just before the great feast, but we are collecting for it, and our funds are pretty considerable. When I think of it," continued Susan, "I feel so excited that I can scarcely sit quiet."

"There is something I want to say," exclaimed Christian at this juncture. "You know the things you made me buy——"

"Made you buy!" cried Susan.

"That you made me buy—that you insisted on my buying," continued Christian firmly. "Well, I went to Dawson's in the High Street and got the things, and brought them home myself in a big basket. I won't say anything about what I felt when I slipped out in the dark. I paid for them, of course, and Dawson gave me the bill. I didn't think very much about it, and when I was studying my Greek history yesterday I slipped it into the book as a mark."

"You did what?" cried Susan.

"I put the bill into the book without thinking. Well, last night Star asked for the loan of my History of Greece. I told her she could take it, and she found the bill, and she showed it to me to-day. She said, too, that we had better not do what we intended to do, for if we did she would tell. She said that I had done a most dishonorable thing when I bought those things in a shop in the town. She is very angry, and she thinks that you had better know that she is angry. That is really why I am here to-night; otherwise you might have got your basket up the attic stairs without any help from me."

Christian dropped down on an upturned box as she uttered the last words. She folded her hands in her lap and gazed straight before her. The other three girls were silent for nearly a minute; then Janet Bouverie took one of Christian's hands and said:

"What a miserable-looking little thing you are!"

"I am very unhappy," said Christian.

"Oh, don't listen to her now," said Susan. "Really her folly passes belief. The idea of putting that tell-tale bill into a common school-book! I never heard of anything so idiotic in the whole course of my life. Where is it now, Christian? Give it to me this minute."

"I haven't got it," said Christian. "Star wouldn't give it to me."

"You mean to tell me that Star has it—Star Lestrange?"

"Yes, I do."

"And she means to keep it, darling," suddenly cried a high, clear, voice, which as usual seemed to fall from the skies.

The next instant the gay, bright face of Star herself shone on the assembled and frightened girls.

"I have come to stay during the remainder of this meeting," said Star in a particularly bright and confident voice. "I am on the committee; you remember that fact, don't you, Susan? Will no one offer me a chair?"

Christian sprang forward and brought another box forward.

"How convenient!" said Star.

She dropped on it, crossed her pretty feet, folded her arms, and looked around her.

"Would you like a cheese-cake, dear?" said Susan, speaking in her usually insolent and bold voice.

She had got over her momentary terror at the sight of Star, and was now rather glad than otherwise at her appearing on the scene.

Now, Star was hungry, and she had naturally a passion for such things as cheese-cakes, queen-cakes, and sweetmeats generally, but she replied in a cold and yet apparently amiable voice:

"Not at present, thank you, Susan, dear. We had better finish our business, had we not? It must be a somewhat important affair to cause you all to meet here between ten and eleven o'clock on a night which is not a general meeting night of the Penwernians."

"We had a good deal to decide," said Susan. "We have to prepare for our next big party; it takes place next week. Have you forgotten, Star?"

"Oh, no," replied Star; "on the contrary, I remember very accurately. When one can only indulge in a good feed of the most unwholesome things in Christendom once a month, is one likely to forget? Nevertheless, Susan, it is strange of you not to have told me; I am a member of the committee."

"I am very sorry," replied Susan. "But really, Star, you are so changeable: at one time the most delightful, pleasant, satisfactory creature on earth, and at other times quite the reverse. We only too eagerly wanted you, dear; of course we did."

Susan held out a fat ungainly hand and tried to take the soft little white palm of Star between her own; but Star resolutely put her hands behind her back.

"I am only here on sufferance," she said; "therefore, I presume I can approve or disapprove. Continue your meeting, ladies; don't, pray, think anything about me. I have forced myself on your society."

"And we are very glad to have you," said Maud. "Aren't we, Christian?"

But Christian said nothing. Star looked at her, and her very bright eyes suddenly softened.

"Come here, Christian," she said, "and stand next to me. Perhaps, after all, though I scarcely thought so this afternoon, you and I are nearer akin than I had any idea of."

"By the way," said Susan, "I don't quite understand you, Star. You are on the committee; you are a Penwernian, and you must clearly understand that if three of the committee assemble at any time, it is what is called a quorum, and we are permitted to act for the good of the rest. We are here now arranging for our next delightful reunion in this attic. We propose that there should be an extra scene of magnificence on that occasion. For instance, we shall wear our fancy dresses."

Star's eyes now became brighter than ever, and her little feet ceased to cross themselves, but were put down firmly on the old deal floor of the attic.

"We shall wear our fancy dresses and disport ourselves in the most delightful fashion in the world," said Susan. "Christian's dress is not yet made, but that can be arranged. Now, however, to the case in point. You know that although our kind teacher, Miss Peacock, does not say she *approves* of our meetings, yet she practically gives her consent to our having them; otherwise she surely would not allow Jessie to blink at the fact and let us all assemble here without taking any notice. But there is always the danger of being too confident, and it certainly was a very mad thing of Christian Mitford to do to leave a bill from a shop in town in her history-book. We should get into terrible trouble if that were discovered. I hear, Star, that you possess the bill. Perhaps you have it now on your person. If so, will you kindly tear it up in our presence?"

"Yes, I have it on my person," said Star. She sprang to her feet as she spoke. "And, girls," she continued, "I do not mean to tear it up; I mean to keep it. What I shall do with it eventually I am not prepared to disclose to-night; but I shall keep it, Susan and Maud and Janet, as a reminder to you that I have you in my power, and that if you do anything again really to break the acknowledged rules of the school, I shall disclose the story of this bill to Miss Peacock. I don't want to make serious mischief, but *noblesse oblige* does form part of my internal arrangements. I may do a wild thing and a silly thing, but I will not do a mean thing. You know the fixed rules of the school with regard to buying things in the shops. Why did you send Christian to Dawson's? Why did you force her to spend her money? You did it, Susan; I want to know the reason."

"And I," said Susan, "will not tell you."

"All right. I give you twenty-four hours from now. If you do not tell me all about the hold you have on Christian Mitford within twenty-four hours, I shall go to Miss Peacock and show her this bill."

"And get Christian and the rest of us into the most dreadful trouble," said Maud. "You can't possibly mean it, Star."

"Yes, but I do mean it; and I think you all know me. When I have made up my mind, it is made up."

"You will be a tell-tale and a turn-coat. You will be hated in the school," said Susan.

"Perhaps so," replied Star; "but I shall do it all the same. Christian, come downstairs and go to bed this minute. Oh! I am tired of underhand ways. I believe I shall cease to be a Penwernian. As to the rest of you, you can please yourselves, but Christian comes down with me. And, Susan, remember—I mean everything that I say. At seven o'clock to-morrow evening I shall be in the bowling-alley. You can come and walk with me there or not, just as you please. If you come, well and good. You can tell your story, and I will decide after hearing it how to act. If you don't come I shall show the bill to Miss Peacock. *Au revoir*, ladies. Come, Christian."

CHAPTER XXI

STAR'S PURSE

When Star ceased speaking she took out her purse, opened it, and produced the bill. It was folded into very minute compass, but it was there, thin and aggravating, with its items quite perceptible even in the somewhat dim light of the attic.

As she turned to go she put the bill back into her purse, and slipped the purse into her pocket; then she left the room. Christian followed her, feeling very much as though she were beaten all over. When they arrived in the corridor which led to the white rooms, Star turned and spoke.

" I believe," she said—and there was a kind tone in her voice—" that I have misunderstood you. I shall know better to-morrow night. You made a vast mistake in confiding your secret, whatever it may happen to be, to those girls. You should have told me. I am not immaculate, and I can understand even if a girl has got into a little scrape. Don't cry, Christian; I won't be hard on you—-I promise that—only don't take up with that lot; they are, I assure you, beneath you. If I were a girl like you, and had a father such as I hear yours is, to say nothing of your pretty mother—for I have heard of her too—I wouldn't touch that sort of girl; I'd let her go by; I'd say to myself, ' She's not for me; she's not the sort I want to know.' Now go to bed and to sleep. Good-night."

Christian said nothing; she felt absolutely tongue-tied. She entered her little room. It was late—very late; the whole school was supposed to be sunk in slumber. She did not even dare to light her candle. She slipped off her clothes and got into bed. A chink of light from the moon came through the curtain of the window. The light lay in two very bright bars on the bed, and as the solitary moon went on her majestic way the bars of light moved, until presently they reached the young girl's shoulder, and then her ear, and then fell across her face. She gave a smothered cry, for once in her home she had read about a woman who was supposed to go mad when the moonlight covered her. Christian felt almost mad that night. She could not sleep; she lay and tossed from side to side until the morning.

The next day happened to be very wet; the sky was covered with a heavy curtain of cloud. There was a sea-fog, too, so that even the beautiful, fresh, sparkling Atlantic could not be seen. But the muffled roar of the waves broke on the stillness; otherwise there was no sound.

As Christian dressed she noticed people, looking large and indistinct in the fog, coming to the house and leaving it. Life at Penwerne Manor would go on just the same whether the outside world was foggy or full of sunshine, and whether young girls were happy or miserable. The school was a strict one, and the hours were rigorously employed; the rules were insisted on no matter whether Christian had a headache or not. Nothing short of absolute illness could excuse lessons not being performed.

She rose and went downstairs, feeling as though the weight of centuries were resting on her shoulders. She entered the long preparation-hall where the girls usually assembled when they first went downstairs. There she stood disconsolately near the door. Presently Star, looking bright and breezy and independent, passed her. She went up to Angela Goring, and standing near her, took her hand with an affectionate squeeze. Susan Marsh had not put in appearance.

Presently a teacher entered, looking sleepy and somewhat depressed. She went through the roll-call. Susan Marsh came in at the last moment, just in time to save herself from a bad mark.

The girls then went into the wide, pleasant-looking refectory, where a wholesome breakfast was provided for them. After breakfast came prayers, and then the usual lessons of the day.

Christian felt all the time as though she were living in a dream. So occupied was her mind, and so absolutely miserable and bewildered did she feel, that for the first time since her appearance in the school she disappointed her teachers. There was a special professor who always came on Wednesdays to give the girls recitation and reading lessons. He was a very irascible person, and could not stand any inattention on the part of his pupils. To find a girl like Christian, so intelligent, so full of soul and true appreciation, was like honey and ambrosia to the poor professor. To hear her read, with her pure Saxon accent and her perfect pronunciation, soothed him, he was fond of saying, as though it were the sweetest music.

He desired her to stand up now and read one of the most celebrated and magnificent passages from Milton's Paradise Lost. She had left off at a certain stanza at the previous lesson, and he desired her to proceed from the line she had last read. Christian took her accustomed place.

Now, it so happened that Miss Peacock herself came into the classroom on this occasion. Mr. Penrose had described to Miss Peacock how splendidly Christian Mitford read, how in all respects she was unlike the ordinary schoolgirl of her age. He was so enthusiastic about her that Miss Peacock decided to hear the young girl herself.

"You must not spoil her by too much praise," she had said to the professor. "I am much interested in Christian Mitford, and will do all in my power for her, but I have to think of more than just the making of a brilliant elocutionist."

"But she will be far better than that," said the professor. "I am convinced she has a beautiful soul. The girl is a sort of genius, although all is more or less in embryo at present."

Now, just as Christian stood up with the open book in her hand and most eyes were fixed on her, the door opened at the farther end of the room and Miss Peacock came slowly forward. Star, who was in the same class, raised her bright eyes and fixed them first on Miss Peacock and then on Christian.

Christian had been looking pale—pale as death—but now a warm wave of color passed over her young cheeks and mounted to her smooth brow. She looked up at Miss Peacock, and even that lady, accustomed as she was to all phases of girl character, was startled at the anguish in Christian's gaze.

"Begin, Miss Mitford," said the professor—"begin.' He stamped his foot with some impatience. He murmured a word or two of the opening lines, and Christian read.

But where was the enthusiasm, where the go, the fire, the pathos, of her delivery a week ago? Her voice shook with emotion then; she forgot herself in the grandeur of the scene. Now she thought only of herself —or rather she thought only of that awful hour to-night when all would be known, and she would be disgraced and made miserable forever.

The book suddenly dropped from her hand; she burst into tears.

"I'm not well; I can't do it," she said.

By this frank admission she saved herself from censure. The professor muttered an apology, looked at Miss Peacock as much as to say, "Don't judge her by this ignominious failure," and went on with the lesson.

Star Lestrange was then asked to read the page aloud, and she did so with as much fire and interest as she was capable of.

Christian resumed her seat in the class, and buried her head in her hands. When the professor's hour was over Miss Peacock went up to her and asked if she would like to rest in the library.

"You are not fit for lessons," she said; "you have a bad headache. What can be the matter?"

"My head does ache, but I am quite well. I did not sleep last night; that is the reason. There is really nothing the matter. I would rather go on with my lessons please."

"You are not fit for them, dear. Obey me. There is perfect quiet in the library at present; go there and sleep. If you go, I promise that you shall not be disturbed until dinner-time."

Christian went away at once. The library was a very pleasant apartment, given over partly to the use of the elder girls and partly to the teachers. Christian entered it, sought a chair by the fire, and lay back in it, soothed for the time being by the stillness and the sleepy crackle of the flames. She was just dozing off into real sleep when a girl entered and said:

"Do you know where Star Lestrange is?"

"No," said Christian, "I don't. What is it, Alice?"

"How bad you look, Christian! What is the matter?"

"What do you want Star for?" repeated Christian.

"I wanted to give her her purse. She sent me upstairs to fetch it. She wanted it in a great hurry for some reason or other. Oh, dear! I have to go into Tregellick at once with my music-mistress. What is to be done?"

"Give it to me," said Christian; "I'll see that she gets it."

"Thank you so much!" said Alice. "Give it to her as soon as you see her, please; she wanted it at once."

"Yes," replied Christian.

Alice dropped the purse into Christian's lap and ran out of the library. She was a merry, lively girl, and did not give another thought to the purse. Christian let it lie in her lap and also forgot it; all her thoughts were centered round the evening, and round what would happen then. What was to be done? How could she live through her life in the school when all was known?

"I could run away again," she thought. "Oh, what a mistake I made to run away the last time! What an awful, awful thing it is for any girl to do the sort of wrong I did then! I should be so happy but for that. I should never take the slightest notice of a girl like Susan Marsh; and I should be very fond of Star, and Angela, and Lucy, and Louisa, and even of Jane. Jane is quite a good sort of girl. They are all of them nice—all except Susan, and perhaps Maud Thompson. Oh, what is to be done?"

She writhed in her misery, but once again the absolute stillness soothed her, and she was dozing off to sleep when she heard a door open at the far end of the room. A girl's voice said "Hush!" and then there was silence. Christian turned her head.

"Is there anybody there?" she called out; but there was no answer, only she fancied that she heard a rustle.

She was half-disposed to rise and go down the long room to find out who was hiding; but after all, she thought, it did not matter. She was yielding more and more each moment to the influence of her comfortable seat, the pleasant fire, and the feeling of warmth and rest. Her troubles did not press her so close; they seemed to go away from her, to recede in the distance. It seemed to her that she did not greatly care what happened. She could not help herself. How sleepy she was! How pleasant the flames looked! When she shut her eyes she saw pictures. They were pictures of her old life—her mother's boudoir, and the nest of all nests behind the curtains—the softness of those pillows on which her head had once rested. Then she was in the attic with her dreams of past and future glory, her romances, her spells of idealism. Or she was with her father, and he was telling her about her grandmother, and what he hoped she herself would be. Then, again, she was in those awful slums near Paddington, and Mrs. Carter was looking in at the window. Christian cried out in her sleep:

"Go away! Don't touch me."

She started up as she spoke, and was wide awake again. A girl was walking down the room. Star's purse still lay in Christian's lap.

"What is it? What are you doing? You frightened me," said Christian.

"Sorry," replied Susan in a nonchalant voice. "I came to look for a book—the 'Heir of Redclyffe.' Don't you like it? Don't you think it a beautiful story?"

"I read it a couple of years ago; I forgot it now," replied Christian.

"Are you better for your sleep?"

"Yes, thank you."

Susan opened the door. Christian suddenly seemed to remember something. She started up, clasped Star's purse in her hand, and ran towards the open door.

"What are you going to do about—about to-night?" she said.

Susan laughed. "Nothing at all," she said.

Just at that moment Star came in.

"Oh, Christian," she said, "you have got my purse! What a search I have had for it! I sent Alice up to my room for it."

"She gave it to me," said Christian quite calmly. "She had to hurry out to her music lesson at Tregellick. She could not find you."

"I was in the bowling-alley. I want it."

Star snatched up her purse and slipped it into her pocket. She then left the room, and Christian returned to her place by the fire. Her sleep had wonderfully soothed her.

After all, nothing mattered—that is, nothing mattered much. Seven o'clock in the bowling-alley seemed a long way off. Her headache was better—nearly gone; she could endure life once more.

CHAPTER XXII

THE BOWLING-ALLEY

At ten minutes to seven that evening two girls might have been seen strolling leisurely in the direction of the bowling-alley. The fog had lifted, and the clouds had rolled by. The evenings were getting long now, and there was still plenty of daylight.

The girls entered the bowling-alley and paced up and down. Their arms were entwined; they were talking eagerly. One girl was Susan Marsh, and the other her special friend Maud Thompson.

"Well," said Maud, "what do you mean to do? Star is quite certain not to give up the bill. Will you confess to her? Will you throw yourself on her mercy?"

"Never!" said Susan. "I am not that sort."

Maud's eyes narrowed. She looked frightened.

"It is a very awkward thing," she said after a pause, "and it makes me downright uncomfortable. Just at present, too, when the Easter holidays are coming; and then all the prizes which we are to compete for at the grand break-up in summer. It's horrid to be in hot water, and we are certain to be if it is known that you sent Christian to Dawson's to buy those things."

"She won't tell," said Susan. "Don't fret yourself; it's all right, I assure you."

"You are a wonderful girl, Susan, but you can't make wrong right. As Star has the bill and nothing will induce her to give it up, I don't see where we are. It seems to me it would be better to tell her than for the whole school to know. She could not be too spiteful or too much of a traitor to her own cause."

"She's a horrid girl and I hate her," said Susan. "She's just the sort that makes more mischief than anybody else. She's neither bad nor good; she's lukewarm. And you know what the Bible says about lukewarm people. I hate her, and I'm not ashamed to say so."

"Of course, I must be guided by you, Susan; but I do trust you not to get me into a scrape."

"I will do what I can; you have no cause to be the least alarmed," said Susan. "Ah! here comes Janet. She hasn't half nor quarter your spunk, Maud, as a rule, but really she looks more calm and collected to-night."

Janet ran up quickly. "The others are coming," she said. "I wonder what is going to happen. I can't help feeling awfully troubled."

"I think the whole thing most horrible," said Maud.

Susan pinched her arm. Just then Star and Christian appeared. Star was holding Christian by the arm. The girls walked slowly forward.

"There is no hurry," said Star; "it will soon be over."

"I wish I was dead," said Christian in a moaning voice.

"Oh, don't be silly!" said Star. "You will soon see for yourself what a jolly time we shall have together. Now then, here they are."

Star walked up to Susan.

"Well, Susan," she said, "the time is up; what do you mean to do?"

Susan gave a slow smile. Her smiles were some of the most aggravating things about her. She always smiled when others stormed.

"Be quick," said Star; "I am in a hurry. I have got to see Miss Peacock before eight o'clock."

"But suppose you don't want to see her at all?" suddenly said Maud.

"I hope I may not have to see her, Maud; I would much rather not. Now, Christian, my dear, good, frightened child, just stand near me, and don't shake so terribly from head to foot. I can't get the mystery out of Christian, Susan, so I have come to you. You know her secret. Most likely it is all nonsense; but anyhow she has confided it to you."

"I did not," suddenly interrupted Christian.

"Then how did you get hold of it, Susan?"

Again Susan smiled, and again she was absolutely silent.

"Oh, bother!" said Star; "we needn't inquire now into the why and wherefore of your knowledge. All we have got to discover—and to discover pretty quickly, too—is what your power over Christian consists of. Why is she afraid of you? Why has she, who is naturally amiable and good and honorable, deliberately turned round and become dishonorable and treacherous? I must say it, Christian, for it is the truth. She is afraid, and I want to get to the bottom of it. You force her to disobey the rules of the school. Why, a girl could be expelled for what you made Christian do. You made her break one of the strictest rules when you ordered her to go out and buy those things for the feast that ought never to be held."

"I like that!" cried Susan. "It doesn't sound well for you to talk, you who have enjoyed those tarts and cheese-cakes and jolly things in our attic."

"It's quite true. I have enjoyed them; but I always made up my mind that if Miss Peacock spoke to me about it I would tell her frankly. I know Miss Peacock has an inkling that we enjoy ourselves occasionally in that fashion. I know also that Jessie is aware of it.

But I have never done anything really underhand. I have never bought tarts and cheese-cakes outside. When I gave a feast the things were sent to me from home. Miss Peacock doesn't object to my having hampers from home twice every term; and as the cakes and sweetmeats are always sent in tin boxes, they last a long time. But that is not the point. The point is this: why is Christian Mitford afraid of you—so much afraid of you that she does wrong because you tell her to? It isn't her wish to do wrong. It is contrary—altogether contrary—to her nature. Why, too, should she spend her money? Hitherto, when we gave feasts in our attic, we subscribed, each of us according to our means. Why should Christian spend her money on food for the rest of you?"

"You can ask her," said Susan. "She can tell you exactly what she likes. Speak, Christian; we are all ready to listen. Tell all about that night—that wonderful night; tell all about Rosy; tell about——"

"Don't!" said Christian in a voice of agony.

"You see for yourself she doesn't want you to know, Star. She would infinitely prefer your being left in ignorance. Much as you think of her, honorable as you esteem her, compared to your humble servant, she has done something which Maud and Janet and I would scorn to do. I have not told Maud, and I have not told Janet. I have been singularly merciful to Christian, and she knows it. Now, I wanted a little money for this special feast, and she was kind enough to offer to lend it to me. And as to the thing you accuse her of—namely, having got the cakes and things from Dawson's in the High Street—I ask you what proof you have?"

"Proof!" cried Star. "How extraordinary you are! I can show it; and I will, too. This kind of thing must not go on. I won't be a party to it."

"Very well," replied Susan; "you must please yourself. The bill is the thing that condemns, is it not?"

"Yes; it proves the truth of my words."

"Where is it? I should like to see it."

"In my purse; you know that. You saw me put it there last night. I have not touched it since."

"Very well," said Susan; "I think that is all. Now, I have a statement to make. I refuse to betray poor Christian. She did some very wrong and shameful things, but I am not going to tell. I am a good friend, although some people don't think so. Cheer up, Chris. Do your worst, Star; do your very worst."

There was a mocking tone in Susan's voice, and a look of defiance all over her. She held herself very erect; her large face was flushed, and her eyes looked calm as well as daring.

"I wish you luck, Star; I wish you luck," she said.

Star put her hand into her pocket and took out her purse.

"I said I would do it, and I will," she said. "It is horrible beyond words, but I must do what I said. I shall take it with me and go. I said I'd go. It is all hateful. I could cry about the whole thing; but it is the only way to save Christian."

"A nice way of saving her!" said Susan. "You talk about saving her and you get her into a most terrible row."

"I would rather do that than have her any longer in your power," said Star.

As she spoke she bent her little head and looked into the purse. Her curly hair fell forward over her eyes; she pushed it back impatiently.

"It is dark," she said, "but I ought to see it. I don't see it. Where can it be?"

Susan had partly turned away.

"Where is what?" she asked, and she returned again to her post close to Star's side.

"Why, the bill—the bill from Dawson's. I put it into this division last night. Where is it?"

"How can I say?" replied Susan. "I don't keep your purse. I saw you put it in and have neither seen it nor heard of it since."

Star's face turned very white. She looked full at Christian.

"Do you know, Christian?" she said.

"Certainly not," said Christian. "Alice gave me your purse when I was sitting in the library by the fire. She threw it into my lap. I had a headache and fell asleep. It lay in my lap when I slept. I did not touch it until you came in. Then I gave it to you."

"Oh!" cried Susan, with a laugh, "I don't think that story will hold water."

She laughed loudly. Then she clutched Maud by the shoulder.

"You see, Maud, we have nothing to fear. Chris, I congratulate you; you acted with great promptitude and decision. You are one of us now. Oh, Chris, Chris! to think you were really so knowing as all that."

Christian did not at first understand; but suddenly the knowledge of Susan's cruel words burst upon her—the knowledge and what that knowledge meant. A crimson tide mounted to her face.

She turned to say a word to Star, but Star had gone.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE RESOLVE OF THE BODYGUARD

"WHY have you sent for us, Star?" said Lucy Norris.

Star was in her own room. It was the prettiest room in the White Corridor. She had it to herself, her parents paying a little extra to secure her this privilege. Round the fireplace were arranged two or three chairs, a little writing-table, and a couple of footstools. Star had a fire whenever she particularly wished for it. It was blazing brightly that evening. The electric light made the room as bright as possible. Star was standing by the fireplace.

"Why have you sent for us?" said Lucy Norris. "Here we all are, but what is the matter?"

"All" consisted of Lucy Norris herself, Angela Goring, Jane Price, Philippa Dawson, and Louisa Twining. The two Sixth Form girls appeared last. Star did not answer. When Philippa entered the room she just nodded to her to close the door. Star as a rule was the gayest of the gay; her laugh was the merriest in the whole school. She was about the most popular girl at Penwerne Manor. She always had a little following of girls, and although she herself was not yet promoted to the Fifth Form, she led girls even of the Sixth. Louisa Twining and Philippa Dawson both looked anxious as they came into the room.

"Here, Louisa," said Star, pointing to what might be considered the place of honor; "will you seat yourself here? And will you, Philippa, take the other chair exactly opposite? Now, girls of the Fourth, establish yourselves where you like. I have something important to say—something that I must say now or forever after hold my peace."

"This is all very dramatic," said Philippa; "but I really want to know what it means. We have your very best interests at heart, Star; and I am sure I can say, both for myself and Louisa, that we would follow you to the world's end. But why were we disturbed just when we were enjoying a special supper with Miss Forest and Mr. Frederick? Mr. Frederick had promised to play Beethoven's Sonata Pathetique for us after supper. Well, what is it?"

"Of course, the occasion is important," said Star. "I have something to say—something dreadful, which hurts me," said the little girl, and her lips trembled. "I have a complaint to make, and I must make it to you. I wish to say in the presence of you all that I want to have nothing whatever to do in the future with Christian Mitford."

Now, Louisa knew very little of Christian. It is true she had taken her in hand during her first day at school, but being very far removed from her in class and at play, she had more or less forgotten her existence.

Philippa, however, raised her dark brows and looked full at Star.

"I have noticed Christian," she said. "She seemed to me to be a particularly nice and well-behaved girl—the sort of girl that you would be sure to take up, Star, for you always know a thoroughly nice girl when you see her."

"I did think I had that penetration," said Star; "but it seems I was wrong. I took a fancy to Christian; I repent of my fancy. I was mistaken; I wish to say it now in the presence of you all."

"It seems an extraordinary thing to send for us to consider," said Louisa, speaking again.

"And I wish further to say," continued Star, "that I believe you, Lucy; you, Angela; you, Jane; and I myself are all doing wrong to have anything to do with the Penwernians. I know, Louisa, that you and Philippa have not joined our great secret society; but of course you have heard of it."

"Oh, yes," said Philippa; "I am quite aware of its existence. I think everyone in the school knows about it."

"Even Miss Peacock herself," said Louisa.

"Yes, even Miss Peacock herself," continued Philippa. "But Miss Peacock sees no harm in it. If she did she would put a stop to it. She once said to me:

"'I don't consider it part of the duty of a head mistress to interfere with the girls as long as they do no wrong. A little secret and mystery is as the breath of life to a schoolgirl, and I shall not interfere as long as nothing wrong is done.'"

"Ah!" said Star, "that is just it. I used to adore mystery," she continued, with a sigh. "I used to think it quite delicious, but I have changed my mind; I no longer think it delicious. I hate and loathe mystery as much," she continued, speaking with vehemence—"as much as I hate and loathe Christian Mitford."

"But what has the poor child done?" said Louisa Twining. "It must be something very bad, Star, for you to behave in this peculiar way. Are you going to tell us?"

"No, I won't tell you, for you would not be interested, and you need not know. She had better beware, however, for if she goes on with her evil practices I shall tell Miss Peacock."

"Perhaps you forget," said Louisa, speaking a little sternly, "that the poor child is practically an orphan, both her parents being at the other side of the world."

"I don't forget it," said Star; "I remember it quite well. I know Miss Peacock is interested in her; she has spoken about her several times. But Miss Peacock does not know her. She does not belong to Miss Peacock's set in this school. I shall watch her. I thought I would tell you about her, but I won't; I will give her another chance. But if she goes on as she has been doing lately I shall certainly tell. I don't mind what she thinks; she belongs to the Susan Marsh set."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Philippa, "I am amazed at that."

"It is true; I have sent for you to let you clearly understand that Christian Mitford belongs to one set of girls in the school, and that I belong to the other; and I don't care whether you think me right or wrong. And I have given up the Penwernians. Lucy, Angela, and Jane, you must represent the committee in future, for I have given up the Penwernians."

"Well," said Lucy, "I will have nothing to do with it if you don't."

"I am glad to hear that."

"Nor I," said Angela Goring.

"Nor I," said Jane Price.

"Very well; I believe you all are right. They are going to have a meeting in a few nights, and we will attend and give in our resignations. After that we shall have nothing whatever to do with the society."

Louisa rose. "I consider this meeting rather unprecedented and, if I may add it, uncalled for," she said. "No girl has a right to accuse her schoolfellow, as you have accused Christian Mitford to-night, without the gravest reason. If you will tell me, and allow me as the head girl of the school to give you a little advice, I shall consider what you say absolutely sacred; but as it is you bewilder me."

"You are not more bewildered than I am," said Star; "not more bewildered nor more disappointed. But as to telling you, there is no use, Louisa. I would if I thought it would make any difference, but it won't; she is past curing."

"No one is past curing," said Louisa. "I am extremely sorry for you, Star. I think you have taken up a wrong notion altogether."

Star said nothing. Philippa and Louisa a few minutes afterwards left the room, and the four girls who had considered themselves Christian's bodyguard were alone.

"Why shouldn't you tell us?" said Angela. "It is very odd to call us together like this, and to draw two of the Sixth Form girls into the matter, and then not to confide in us."

"If I told you, you could not live in the same school with her, so I won't tell you," said Star. "I will give her just a chance, although I will have nothing to do with her; but if she goes on with her bad ways I shall certainly tell Miss Peacock."

Meanwhile a pale girl was walking swiftly down the corridor. The white chamber where Christian slept was near Star's room. Angela Goring slept in the room next to Christian's; Star's room came next, and then Jane Price's. Christian entered her room now and shut the door. It felt cold and desolate. The fog had been followed by a cold night; there was a slight frost. Christian did not even trouble to turn on the electric light; she went straight across the icy-cold chamber and flung herself, dressed as she was, on the bed. There was a warm eider-down quilt on the bed, but she did not trouble to wrap herself in it. She lay still, and the cold pierced through her body, and the iron of adversity entered into her soul. She was too much stunned, too miserable, too frightened to care. She felt as though someone had tied her up in chains that she could never get rid of again; she could never extricate herself.

There come times when such trouble visits the human heart that it can scarcely realize what has befallen it. Such a time had come to-night to Christian. Susan had got her into her trap, and those girls whom she had believed to be her friends had turned against her. She had seen Star in the distance when the girls entered the refectory for supper, and the look on Star's face, as her bright eyes fixed themselves for one moment on Christian was one which the poor child could never forget. It was impossible for Christian to eat. She could not attend to her lessons; the headache which she had endured during the early part of the day was so bad that she was glad to ask Jessie's permission to retire earlier than usual.

As she lay on her bed she heard a sound, and looking up, she noticed that she had not fastened her door properly when she entered, and that it was now a little ajar. There was a rustle of dresses as the girls went by, and then she heard the well-known, beautiful voice of Angela Goring saying:

"I never should have thought it of her, and if anyone else except Star had told me, I should not have believed her."

"But Star, with all her wildness, never exaggerates," said Lucy Norris. "Dear, dear! who *would* have thought it?"

"They are speaking of me," thought Christian. "I can't live through this; I can't endure it. What is to be done?"

They had scarcely gone to their own rooms before the door was opened and little Jessie entered. In a twinkling there was a change of scene. She turned on the electric light. She glanced toward the bed, and the flushed face and tear-stained eyes of the girl she loved best in the entire school met her gaze.

"This will never do," thought Jessie.

She put a match to the fire, which was already laid in the grate, and soon the crackling of the wood and the cheerful light of the blaze transformed the room. Then she went up to the bed.

"My child," she said, "how cold you are! Let me just put this eider-down over you."

She wrapped it around Christian, who shivered with a sort of forlorn sense of comfort.

"My poor, dear child, you are ill."

"My head aches," said Christian. "It has been aching all day."

"What can be wrong, darling?"

"Everything, Miss Jessie."

"Oh, we often feel like that when we have headaches. But come; you must get into bed. I will undress you; then I will bring you a cup of something hot, and after that you will sleep."

Christian was so thoroughly miserable that Miss Jessie's ministrations were gratefully received. She allowed the little woman to take off her things and to lay her between the sheets, to wrap the eider-down over her, and then put her cool, firm hand on the burning forehead.

"I'll be back in a minute, darling," she said. "You took no supper this evening. That is the worst way in the world to treat a headache of your sort. I'll be back immediately."

In a very short time Miss Jessie returned with a little tray containing a cup of hot coffee and some bread and butter.

"Now you must eat, Christian," she said; "you must eat and drink. Afterwards you shall sleep."

Christian did eat and drink. It was wonderful how the food revived her, how altogether less miserable the world seemed when she had finished her little meal.

"And now you won't guess what I have got for you," said Miss Jessie.

"No, Jessie, I can't. And you can't have brought me anything—anything at all that I should care for."

"Yes, but I have. What do you say to two letters?"

"Letters?" said Christian, the color rising to her cheeks.

"A foreign letter—I think it must come from your father or mother—and a letter from London. Here they are. Put them under your pillow. It is too late for you to read them to-night; or if you would really rather——"

"Give them to me," said Christian. She looked at the writing. "Yes, from father," she said; "and from my dear old nurse. I won't read them to-night," she continued. "I don't think I could understand them. Jessie, the most dreadful thing has happened, and I can never, never be happy again. I don't deserve anything good, for I have been a naughty, bad girl, and I am, oh, so miserable and unhappy!"

"I tell you what it is, Christian," said Miss Jessie: "if you don't go to sleep, and in the morning tell me all about it, I will take you straight to Miss Peacock. That I will, for though I am an easy-going woman, when my blood is up I can be as despotic as the greatest virago in the land."

CHAPTER XXIV

MISS PEACOCK

The next day Christian was too ill to rise. She had tossed from side to side on her restless bed during the whole of that miserable night, and when Miss Jessie, who could scarcely sleep herself from anxiety, went to visit her at an early hour in the morning, she found the poor child with flushed cheeks, eyes so heavy that she could scarcely look at her, and a temperature far above the normal. The doctor was hastily summoned. He said that Christian had got a bad chill and must stay in bed for the day. He ordered medicines and absolute quiet, and when night brought no change for the better, and on the following morning the young girl was still very ill, with a further rise of temperature and pains and aches in all her bones, he went down to see Miss Peacock.

"What is the matter with Christian Mitford?" asked that good lady. "My right hand, as I always call Jessie Jones, is very anxious about her."

"I hope she will soon be well," said the doctor, "but at present her condition is not satisfactory. I thought yesterday that she had simply got a chill, and that by care and certain medicines we could get it under. But now I am afraid she has been subjected to some kind of shock. She refuses to eat, and looks utterly miserable. Another strange thing is that she has got two letters, Miss Jessie tells me; one is from her father in India, and the other from an old servant in London; and she won't open them, or let anyone read them to her. She is beyond doubt in a very nervous, highly-strung state. Miss Jessie tells me that during the night she rambled a little and was slightly delirious. During that time she talked a great deal about one of the other girls of the school."

"And what was her name?" asked Miss Peacock.

"Susan Marsh. She was asking Susan Marsh to do something, and Susan was refusing. She also mentioned Miss Lestrange."

"Then, doctor, if it is really your opinion that Christian Mitford is suffering from shock, what steps do you propose to take to relieve her mind?"

"If she has anything on her mind, Miss Peacock, the sooner she unburdens herself the better."

"I will do what I can, doctor. I am glad you have told me. Steps must certainly be instituted at once to relieve the poor child."

The doctor went away, promising to send certain medicines and to return again in the evening, or sooner if it were necessary.

He had scarcely left the house before the great gong in the central hall rang for prayers, and Miss Peacock a few minutes afterwards entered. All the girls were present, and also all the teachers, with the exception of little Jessie and Christian Mitford. Miss Peacock read a portion of the Bible, then uttered the usual prayer; and when the service was over as the girls were about to scatter to their different classrooms, she raised her hand.

"I have something to say," was her remark—"something which gives me a great deal of pain. As it concerns the entire school, I had better speak of it before the assembled school. Servants, you may leave the room; girls and teachers, please remain."

The servants filed out in their accustomed orderly manner. The door was closed behind them; the girls drew together in a group, and the teachers stood a little way off. Miss Peacock looked steadily at the assembled girls; she scarcely glanced at the teachers. Well she knew that the mischief, if mischief there were, was to be found in that group of bright-looking girls.

"I have always been very proud of my school," she began. "I have kept school here now for many years. I have been particular as to the sort of girls whom I have admitted to Penwerne Manor. No girl could ever come to this school without having a reference from the parents of a former pupil. By this means I have insured having in my midst girls of unimpeachable character, girls to whom the greater sins would at least be unknown. In all lives, my dear girls, there must come temptation; and such wrong-doing as worldliness, thoughtlessness, bad temper, and jealousies will disfigure and mar the peace of all communities. This must be the case as long as human nature is human nature. But there are other sins, which I have been proud—yes, proud—to think that my girls who live at Penwerne Manor would never commit. One of these sins is the sin of cruelty."

Miss Peacock paused. She looked at all the girls. In particular her eyes fastened themselves upon the face of Susan Marsh. Susan Marsh, Miss Peacock had to admit, was a little different from the other girls. She had been sent to the school under special conditions; for her mother was dead, and her father had pleaded that as a girl whom he knew very well had been educated at Penwerne Manor, and had in all ways fulfilled Miss Peacock's ideals, so his child—his motherless child—might have a chance. And Miss Peacock had accepted Susan, and hoped that Susan was at least following in the lead of girls higher in morals than herself.

To-day Susan's face looked dark. She did not meet the fixed gaze of her teacher; on the contrary, she shuffled her feet and her eyes sought the ground.

"The sin of cruelty," continued Miss Peacock, "I have at least not expected to find in your midst."

And now she looked past Susan and fixed her steadfast gaze on Star. Whatever Star's faults, there was nothing underhand about her. Her eyes, soft and bright—bright as a robin's—were raised full to her teacher. A flush of color did rise to her cheeks when Miss Peacock so steadfastly regarded her, but there was nothing underhand in those clear eyes, nor in that bright, vivacious face.

"I regret to have to tell you all," continued Miss Peacock, looking now at none of the girls in especial, "that such a case has taken place in this school. A girl—one of the forty who are numbered as my pupils—has been cruel to a young girl who belongs to us all. The girl so cruelly treated is Christian Mitford. She has not been here very long, and she has come to me as a very precious legacy. I knew Christian Mitford's grandmother, and she was quite the most upright woman I ever met. I owe a great deal to her influence. I also know Christian's father. There are few men who bear a more upright or braver character. He has been entrusted with a post which requires all the best energies of a man to carry out its duties. He has gone in the face of danger and banishment to fulfill those duties. He has gone to serve his country in a moment of great danger. I cannot exactly explain what his duties are, but any of you girls whose fathers are in the diplomatic service will understand me. Christian's father has left her behind, for she could not encounter the dangers of the climate of the country where he is now living. Christian's mother has gone with her husband. Her child has therefore come to me more or less as an orphan. I said to her father when he wrote to beg of me to take Christian, that she would be happy in my big family, that she would find her *métier*, that she would thrive in body and spirit, that she would become an accomplished and Christian woman. Now, Christian is a particularly bright child, and particularly intelligent, and there is no reason whatsoever why she should not be happy here. That she is not happy there is not the slightest doubt. That she is so unhappy as to cause her to be ill is also, I regret to say, a fact. Dr. Webb saw her this morning, and he says that she has encountered a shock; he does not know of what sort, but he and I both feel that we must come to you girls for the explanation. He fears that she will not be better until the load on her mind is relieved. She is too ill to be worried; she is too ill even to be questioned. To treat her wisely and well we must know what to do. Now, girls, I ask your advice. How am I to treat Christian Mitford? We don't want her to become seriously ill, and she is in a fair way to be so unless her mind is completely relieved. What do you say girls? Have you anything to suggest?"

There was a dead silence amongst all the girls. The teachers looked immensely interested. Miss Forest opened her lips as though to speak. Mr. Fredericks, who had come in just before prayers, glanced at Miss Forest. Presently Miss Forest stepped forward.

"I am absolutely in the dark," she said, "with regard to Christian Mitford's trouble, but I do know that two nights ago Mr. Frederick and I were entertaining two of the Sixth Form Girls, Louisa Twining and Phillipa Dawson, at supper, when a hurried message came for them to visit Star Lestrange in her room. We were surprised at the time. This, of course, may have nothing to do with Christian Mitford, but I think it worth mentioning."

"And so do I think it worth mentioning," said Mr. Frederick. "I observed on Wednesday, when I gave Christian her last music lesson, that she was disturbed, not herself. The brilliancy which always characterized her playing had deserted her."

"She was unquestionably not herself on Wednesday," said Miss Forest. "She seemed much troubled all day. Did you not notice, Miss Peacock, when you were sent for to hear her recite her portion from Milton's works, how badly she did it?"

"I certainly did. Then you think she was unhappy then?"

"In the light of subsequent events I very much fear she was," said Miss Forest.

"You have nothing further to say?"

"Nothing. I know nothing more with regard to her case."

"Has anyone anything more to say with regard to her case?"

Louisa Twining now held up her hand.

"What is it, Louisa, my dear?" said Miss Peacock, speaking with that respect which always characterized her when she addressed the head girl of the school.

"I have nothing to say personally," said Louisa; "I only wish I had. But I think Star, if she would, could tell you something."

"I would much, much rather not tell," said Star. She turned very white, then crimson. "I cannot—I will not tell. Please don't ask me."

"I must ask you, Star. My dear child, this makes me very unhappy. Go to my room at once, Star. I will join you presently. Are you certain, Louisa, that you have nothing more to say?"

"Except to repeat my words. Star Lestrange can tell you something if she will."

"Star, dear, go at once. You know I could never accuse you of unkindness. But go, dear; I will see you in my room immediately."

Miss Peacock's own private sitting room was much admired by the girls of Penwerne Manor. It was only on rare and most special occasions that she allowed the girls of the school to visit her there. When she did it was to each and all of those girls as though they had entered into paradise. The shackles of school life seemed to fall away from them; they felt at home. All their most brilliant and most refined instincts seemed to awaken and grow stronger in Miss Peacock's presence. She was a very literary woman, highly accomplished in every sense of the word. Her knowledge of foreign languages, her knowledge of art and the best English literature, made her conversation delightful. Then she had the knack of knowing how to speak. Without in the least uttering a sermon, she had the power of awaking the best in each of the young lives. The girls were enthusiastic about their head-mistress. They loved her almost with passion. Miss Peacock was fond of saying to them:

"I intend you to obey your teachers. I have made rules for your guidance, and those rules are not to be broken, but I have made no rule—not one—with regard to your conduct to me. I will leave that conduct to the love you bear me. If you don't love me, nothing I can do will make you; if you do, all will be easy—for those who love try hard to please the beloved."

Amongst the girls who most adored Miss Lavinia Peacock was Star. Star had naturally a most vivacious, brilliant, and affectionate nature. All that was good and beautiful in her character was drawn out by Miss Peacock, and the idea of going to her private room now filled her with the strangest sensations.

"Under ordinary circumstances I should love it," thought the girl. "As it is——"

She trembled exceedingly as she turned the handle of the door and entered. The room, with its bright fire, its beautiful decorations, its lovely pictures, its still more beautiful flowers, soothed Star as it always did; but then the memory of Christian—Christian ill, very ill—Christian treated, as it seemed to the girl herself now, with great cruelty, came over her, and flinging herself into a chair, she wept.

"Why have I been dragged into this?" she thought. "What am I to do? No, I won't tell what I know. If I couldn't tell last night, still less can I tell now. Oh, poor Christian! poor Christian!"

It was just then when Miss Peacock entered. She noticed at a swift glance Star's attitude of utter despair. She did not make any remark, however, but going to her accustomed chair near the fire, she took up her knitting and began to knit. Her whole attitude was the very essence of peace. Star, who had been sobbing so violently that she could not altogether restrain herself, soon ceased her tears. Presently, with wet eyes and flushed face, she glanced at her teacher. Miss Peacock, to all appearance, was in a dream. She was knitting, but her eyes were gazing straight before her. Sometimes her lips moved. Her face was pale; her eyes were full of trouble.

"Oh, Miss Peacock!" said the child at last.

Then Miss Peacock dropped her knitting; over her whole face there came an alert, watchful, and yet affectionate expression. She held out both her arms to Star, and the next instant the weeping child was clasped to her breast. Miss Peacock was one of those women who are mothers without ever having had children, and Star knew as those firm arms clasped her, and those lips kissed her on the brow, that she was to all intents and purposes in the presence of a mother.

By and by Miss Peacock loosened her clasp, and motioned Star to a chair by her side. She took one of the girl's hands, pressed it gently, and said:

"Now, darling, you will tell me."

"But I can't," said Star in a choking voice.

"You can't, Stella? You can't tell me about that which I have spoken of, and yet you know?"

"I may not know. I know something; I certainly don't know all; I am distressed, I am unhappy; but if you banish me from the school even, I shall not tell."

Star's voice gained courage as she proceeded. She looked full up at Miss Peacock now.

"Star," said her teacher, "I am the last to force anyone to act against her conscience. Is it a matter of conscience with you to keep this thing to yourself?"

"It would injure Christian if I were to tell; it would be unfair."

"Can you not give me some hint, Star? Think of my position: a child—the child of a valued friend—very, very ill, and I am unable to cope with her malady. You can cope with it. Will you?"

Star rose. "I will go and see her if you like," she said. "The other day I was angry; you would have been angry if you were in my place. I would not speak to her nor look at her. Oh! don't ask me to say any more; it is unfair to her."

"Of course, I must not question you, but your words alarm me. In spite of your efforts to conceal something, you are driving me to the conclusion that Christian has done something very wong."

Star was silent.

"Is that so, Star? Please speak."

"I cannot tell you anything; I must not. There is one perhaps who could——"

"Ah! you allude to Susan Marsh. It is an extraordinary thing," continued Miss Lavinia, "that from the very first entrance of Christian into this school, Susan Marsh seems to have had a most pernicious influence on her. That such a girl as Susan could affect such a girl as Christian is a puzzle to me. Do you agree with me, Star, that Susan is at the bottom of this?"

"I ought not to say anything against Susan, but will you question her?"

"I will do so?"

"And may I go and see Christian?"

"She is very ill, but it may do her good to see you. Go, my child; and God bless you. I am intensely unhappy about this. I want to act with justice to everyone—to everyone—and I confess I cannot see my way."

Miss Peacock's large gray eyes were full of tears. Star saw them, and the next instant the impulsive child had dropped on her knees.

"Oh, I love you—I love you!" she said. "We all love you. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you, but if you knew all you would counsel me not to tell what has happened with regard to Christian. I will go to her; I will go at once."

"Do, Star; and on your way through the schoolroom, tell Susan Marsh to come to me immediately."

Star left the room. The momentary weakness which had made her sob so bitterly was over. It seemed to her that all of a sudden her contempt for Christian, her dislike to her, had vanished. She had a sort of misgiving that, after all, Christian might be innocent. If such was the case, she, Star, was the one who had treated Christian with such rare cruelty.

She entered the central hall, where the greater number of the girls had their classes during the morning. It was in this room she would be certain to find Susan Marsh. Yes, there she was, her large face slightly flushed, her eyes suspicious and eager. She was pretending to copy a theme into one of her exercise books, but Star saw at once that she was not thinking about her work.

The moment Star entered the room several of the girls looked up at her, and all with more or less curiosity. Had she relieved the tension? Had she confessed whatever she had to confess to Miss Peacock? Was Christian innocent or guilty? The whole school was in a state of great excitement with regard to Christian, and different opinions were hotly argued amongst the girls with regard to the why and wherefore of her present condition. Never before at Penwerne Manor had there been such an interesting and remarkable case under discussion. Susan, however, had refused to say anything about Christian.

"Oh, I am sick of her!" she had exclaimed when Janet Bouverie and another girl came and spoke to her on the subject. "Do let her alone, Florence. I don't want the subject mentioned in my hearing. I can only say that it was a very bad day for the school when she entered it."

Lessons began, and the girls were forced to keep their opinions to themselves. It was in the midst of the history lesson that Star walked up the room. The history mistress paused and looked at Star. Star went up to her.

"I have a message from Miss Peacock. She wants to see Susan Marsh at once."

"At once, Star? Does that mean now or after school?"

"Now," said Star briefly.

"Susan," said Miss Forest, glancing at the girl, "go at once to your head-mistress in her private room."

Susan gave Star a very venomous look. Her face turned white. She wondered if Star had really told what she knew; but then she reflected that by no possibility could Star know the truth. She could not know who had stolen the bill out of her purse. She could not possibly guess in what way Susan Marsh had become possessed of Christian's secret. Above all things, she had not the most remote idea that strangers were to be admitted into the attic on the following Wednesday to partake of the Penwernian feast. Any one of these things, if known, would have insured Susan's removal from the school under the most bitter and disgraceful circumstances. But no one could know, and Susan tossed her head in the air, walked down the corridor, entered the central hall, quickly traversed another passage, and knocked at Miss Peacock's door. Miss Peacock said, "Come in," and Susan entered.

"Ah, Susan!" said her mistress, glancing at the girl, and treating her altogether in a different manner from what her conduct had been to Star; "come and stand before me. I have something to say to you."

Susan considered this an indignity. She augured the worst from Miss Peacock's somewhat stern manner.

"What is it, Miss Peacock?" she asked.

"Stand quiet, Susan; I want to ask you a question."

Susan made no remark, but she shut her lips and looked full into the face of her mistress.

"I want to ask you a direct question," said Miss Peacock; "and I want to ask it now that we two are alone—not really alone, Susan, for there is One present, mighty, all-powerful, all-knowing. Here in His presence, therefore—the presence of our God, Susan—I ask you if you can throw any light on the very unhappy condition of my dear pupil, Christian Mitford?"

"I can thrown no light," answered Susan.

She spoke calmly enough, although her heart was beating almost to suffocation.

"Are you certain, Susan? If you could see the One who is always present, would you make such an answer?"

"I can throw no light on it," repeated Susan; but now her eyes sought the ground and her lips trembled.

Miss Peacock uttered a sigh.

"Star Lestrange says you can."

"That's just like Star Lestrange," replied Susan. "She does know something—of that I am certain—but she won't tell, and throws the thing on me. I hate her. She's the worst, most deceitful girl in the school. I hate her more than I hate Christian. But I hate them both."

"Susan," said Miss Peacock after a pause, "do you know the exact circumstances under which you came to this school?"

Susan raised her brows in some surprise.

"I suppose as a pupil, and because my father paid for me," she said after a pause.

"You certainly came as a pupil, and most certainly also your father pays your school expenses. But in a select school of this sort there is generally a very strict inquiry instituted with regard to each girl who comes here. You were at another school before you came. You were at a school at Margate."

"How do you know that?" said Susan, and her voice became sharp with anxiety.

"I happen to know it. What is more, I had a letter from the head-mistress of that school telling me certain things about you. Oh, no, my dear, you need not turn so white; I have not the slightest wish to injure you with your schoolfellows; but after receiving that letter I wrote to your father declining to receive you as one of my pupils. He was much distressed. He is a good man. He came to see me, and he spoke of you as his orphan child; your mother was not long dead."

"No; mother died very suddenly," said Susan. Her words came out falteringly; in her unattractive eyes tears swam.

"Your father gave a pitiful picture with regard to his motherless girl, and after due reflection and consulting Jessie Jones, I decided to admit you to the school. Any girl who arrived at a school like this labeled as a black sheep might far better never come. I was therefore most anxious not to tell your schoolfellows anything whatever about you. Nor, shall I tell them now, Susan. No, I will not injure you to that extent; but unless Christian Mitford is happy and well by the end of the present term, and unless no further stories of your misdoings reach me, I shall expect your school life at Penwerne Manor to terminate at Easter. Have you anything to say, my dear?"

"I think you are awfully unkind. I hate you all. I wish I might go."

"You don't realize what it means, Susan. To have been already dismissed for want of honesty and truthfulness from school at Margate, and to be again dismissed—or practically dismissed—from Penwerne Manor, would injure you for life, my poor child. Be certain of this: nothing would induce me to make you so unhappy if it were not absolutely essential. It rests with yourself, Susan. A little courage and determination to cease to do evil, and to learn to do well, will make all things possible even for you. Now go. You leave a very anxious and unhappy head-mistress behind you; but when you can come to me and confess, I will certainly be as lenient as circumstances can permit."

"I will never, never confess," said Susan. "I have nothing to confess," she added sullenly, and she left the room, hanging her head, a scowl between her brows.

Meanwhile Star had gone straight upstairs to the White Corridor. She paused for a moment outside Christian's door. The door was slightly ajar. The blinds were down at the windows; the fire burned low, and yet with a bright gleam in the grate. Little Jessie was seated by the fire, bending forward and stirring something from time to time that simmered in a saucepan.

Star tapped with her knuckles on the door. Jessie rose at once.

"Oh, my dear!" said the little woman when she saw Star, "you must on no account come in; you would trouble her dreadfully. Go away, dear; leave her to me. She mustn't see anyone now. I have the doctor's orders."

"But I wish you would let me see her. I think—I am sure—that I won't do her any harm. I may do her good. I told Miss Peacock, and Miss Peacock is willing. Please let me come in for a minute or two, Jessie. And, please, when I go in, go out, Jessie. What I say to her I must say to her alone. No one must be present when I talk to her."

"I can't permit you to enter, Star, until I get Miss Peacock's authority from herself. If you like to stand here just within call, I will run down to Miss Lavinia and find out what she wishes."

Miss Jessie departed at once, and Star stood outside the door. All was still in the room. The sick girl must be asleep. By and by Miss Jessie, her eyes full of tears, reappeared.

"You can go in, Star," she said. "But don't stay long. And do—do be guided by wisdom; and do—do be kind."

"I will, Jessie," said Star in a voice of great affection; "if for no other reason, for your sake."

Miss Jessie went away, and Star on tiptoe entered the room.

Christian was asleep. She was lying on her back. Her arms were flung outside the bedclothes; the heavy, dark lashes swept her pale cheeks; her fair hair was pushed back from her broad forehead. She looked wonderfully sweet and wonderfully intellectual. Star noticed this first of all; then she saw the real, the latent nobility in the face. Whatever its faults, deceit—real deceit—could have nothing to do with it.

Star felt her heart beat. She would not wake the sick girl. She must wait quietly until Christian opened her eyes. Star sank down on the chair by the fire. The little saucepan stood on the hob. Now and then Star bent forward and stirred the chicken broth which Miss Jessie was making. What was she to do? What was she to believe?

Star had never come face to face with any really complicated case of wrong-doing. She had been attracted to Christian from the first; then she had been repelled by her; then she had been very much puzzled by her extraordinary allegiance to Susan Marsh and her set. When she saw the grocery bill in Christian's history-book she had been astonished, but scarcely inclined to blame Christian very severely. Christian did not know, she had argued, and Susan was clever and full of resources, and was absolutely sure to force the girls who were under her power to carry out her will. Yes, Star was terribly vexed, but she scarcely blamed Christian for this. She almost took Christian's part when she went up to the front attic and spoke about what she had discovered. But when on the following evening she went to the bowling-alley, and opening her purse, found that the little tell-tale bill had been removed, and when she further remembered that the purse had been in Christian's possession for over an hour, her lingering liking for the girl vanished on the spot.

"Her looks belie her," she thought. "She is bad, deceitful, unworthy of any good girl's affection. I'll give her up."

So angry was she that she had acted on impulse. She had sent for her chosen friends and for two of the most important girls in the school, and had told them that she had given Christian up. She had further said that she wished to resign her post on the committee of the secret society of the Penwernians. She had spoken with great heat and bitterness.

Then came the news of Christian's illness, and Star's interview with Miss Peacock. During that interview it seemed to the girl that she was once more forced to change her point of view. There were even yet possibilities that Christian might be innocent. Beyond doubt she was suffering. The very worst characters don't suffer when they commit sin. Christian was suffering so badly that the doctor was anxious about her. He said she was suffering from a shock. Now, what had shocked her? If her character was all that Star had imagined it to be two days ago, why should the shock of what she had done make her ill? Star determined now at any cost to keep Christian's secret.

"I don't understand things," thought the child, "but if there is a way out I will try to find it; and if there is any sort of doubt I will give Christian the benefit of it."

As she thought this she glanced again toward the bed; then she gave a start and stood up, for Christian's eyes were wide open and were fixed on her face.

Now Christian's young face was very pale. She did not look at all surprised at seeing Star. Star went up to her.

"How are you, Christian?" she said in a low voice. "Are you better?"

"I am quite well," replied Christian.

Her words came out with a sort of indifference. She looked at Star, and then she smiled.

"Oh, I am quite well," said the young girl.

"If you are well you will get up, won't you?"

"It doesn't matter," said Christian.

"But you needn't stay in bed if you are well, need you?"

"It doesn't matter," said Christian again.

Then the thankfulness which had filled Star's heart just for a moment left it, and in its place came a queer sensation of pain and fear. Although Christian said she was quite well, her face belied her; and still more her words belied her.

"Do you know me, Chris?" said Star, bending towards her.

"Yes," replied Christian; "you are Star Lestrange."

"We have always been friends, haven't we, Christian?"

"No," said Christian, still speaking in that level, indifferent voice; "you were never my friend."

"Oh, Christian! but I tried to be."

"No," said Christian again.

She gazed straight before her. Her voice was never raised; it never altered its level, indifferent tones. It seemed to Star as she listened that Christian did not care whether they were friends or foes. For a minute the little girl was absolutely silent.

"I wish to tell you something," she then said gravely. "Can you listen to me, Christian?"

Christian's eyes were fixed on Star's face. She did not speak.

"I wish to tell you that I am very sorry for what happened a couple of days ago. I don't mean only about not finding Dawson's bill in my purse after you had it in your lap for an hour or more; I don't mean only that, but I mean what I did afterwards. For I was so hurt, and so frightened, and so angry that I scarcely knew what I was doing. I forgot myself, Christian, and I sent for all my friends and told them that I had given you up."

"Yes," said Christian.

"Did you know it, Chris? You look as though you knew it."

"I heard you—at least I heard something about it. The girls passed the door, and they spoke to each other. I knew you had given me up."

"And weren't you shocked?"

"Shocked? No."

"Didn't you care?"

"No."

"Christian, that is unlike you."

"Perhaps; but everything is unlike me. Everything has been unlike me since I came to Penwerne Manor."

"Christian, tell me the truth. Lying as you are there, looking as you now look, I am certain—positive—that you would not tell a lie."

"Perhaps not," said Christian.

"You never, never took that bill out of my purse?"

"No."

"You are certain?"

"Yes. I didn't open your purse. But it doesn't matter whether you believe me or not. You think I did; it doesn't matter.

"Christian, tell me what you know."

"Alice gave me your purse to keep for you. She threw it into my lap. I fell asleep. I slept for an hour. When I awoke it was still in my lap. I never gave it to anybody else. I don't know how the bill was taken out of your purse. But that is all as far as I am concerned."

Steps were heard in the corridor. Miss Jessie was coming back. Miss Jessie would certainly be impatient. Christian, looking more dead than alive, was lying prone on her bed, and Star had not fulfilled her mission. Suddenly an idea came to her.

"I am going to take both your hands," she said.

Christian made no movement whatever to put her hands into Star's clasp. Star took them.

"Now listen to me, Christian Mitford. I have done wrong, and I confess it. I hated you, but I hate you no longer. I did love you—well, I love you back again. Listen to me, Christian. I love you back again; and I know, Christian, that you didn't take the bill out of my purse. I know that you are innocent. Now get well, Chris—get well, for I love you."

CHAPTER XXV

THE LETTER

Susan Marsh was thoroughly upset. She was not repentant. It is not the nature of a girl like Susan easily to repent. She was not at all sorry for what she had done, but she was terribly afraid of the consequences. She also feared that she had gone too far. At the school at Margate she had lived through an ugly time. There had been a theft, and she had been concerned in it. She had, in fact, been expelled from the school. Her wrong-doing at the time had by no means terrified her, but she disliked the ceremony which had meant her expulsion from Mrs. Anderson's school. She had to pass through a group of her schoolfellows, and the eyes of the girls seemed to burn her. They were by no means extraordinary girls in any sense of the word; they were girls quite moderately good, and with heaps of faults, but they all gazed with the utmost contempt at Susan as she shuffled down the long line which they formed, and so got out of the school.

Now, Miss Peacock would certainly not expel any girl, however wicked, in so cruel a manner; but Susan did not know that. She was certain that if Miss Peacock sent her back to her father at Easter with such a report as she threatened to give, and with announcement that she would not be received in the school again, something fearful would happen. Mr. Marsh was a merchant, a very rich man, and Susan was his only child. He was a big, red-headed, stout man, with a harsh voice and a harsh laugh; but he was quite upright. He had strong ideas with regard to honor and rectitude; and if Susan came back to him so disgraced, she did not know all he would do. He would send her away; he would banish her from all other girls. He would put her under the care of the very strictest disciplinarian he could possibly find. She must not run such a risk. Beyond doubt she had got herself into a scrape. It was not only that silly affair with regard to Christian Mitford. Christian had been fairly useful to Susan as long as she could obtain her money and press her into her service, but she had no time to give a thought to her now. She had got all Christian's money; there was nothing of it left, and Susan made up her mind to leave her alone, to announce to her friends that she thought Christian Mitford a fairly good girl, and, in short, if she could manage it with a few clever words, to undo the mischief she had hitherto done. Christian would recover and take her place in the school; Star Lestrange would be her friend, and her brief time of friendship with Susan and her set would be forgotten.

But there were other things. There was the great feast in the front attic which was to take place next Wednesday, and there were the girls who were to be invited to attend it. Susan felt terribly anxious when she thought of those girls. One of them was Florence Dixie, who was the daughter of a lawyer who lived in the town of Tregellick. Florence was a bold, wild girl, with quantities of black hair which curled all over her head. She had black eyes to match the hair, a turned-up nose, and a loud laugh. It had been Florence's wildest ambition to become an inmate of Penwerne Manor, but Miss Peacock did not approve of the young lady, and had declined the honor of becoming her instructress.

There were also Ethel and Emma Manners. They were the daughters of a rich greengrocer in the town. Ethel and Emma had more pocket-money than they knew what to do with, and once having met Susan when she had no right to be out, and lent her some money. They were pleased to strike up any sort of acquaintance with a Penwerne Manor girl, and Susan had taken advantage of their friendship to get several good things for herself. Ethel and Emma had told Susan that if she could smuggle them into the house, and make them acquainted with some of the other girls of the Manor, they would each give her a very beautiful present at Easter.

"We will manage," said Ethel, "so that Miss Peacock shall never know. You'll do it, won't you?"

Susan had said of course she would, and she had planned the whole thing.

Florence Dixie, who thought herself considerably above the Manners girls, was still quite willing to accompany them on this occasion. They would climb up the elm-tree at the back of the house; they would tap at the window, and Susan herself, aided by the other girls, who of course must be let into the secret, would admit them. Then there would be high-jinks; then there would be a glorious time. Oh, how they would eat, how they would drink, how they would laugh! How they would enjoy themselves!

Florence Dixie had promised not to come empty-handed to the feast. She would bring such plumcake as had not been eaten for years by those girls.

"I can manage it," said Florence. "for my cousin, Amy Hall, was married a fortnight ago, and there is a huge wedge of her wedding-cake in the pantry. I shall get a great slice from it and bring it with me. Oh, it will be fun!"

"And we can all sleep on it," cried Susan, almost shrieking with delight, "and dream. Oh, to think of dreaming of our future husbands! What a delicious joke!"

Ethel and Emma were to bring fruit from their father's shop, and anything else they could manage to convey.

The girls of the town were very much delighted, but very much afraid of their escapade being discovered, and very proud of their acquaintance with Susan.

But now Susan, as she sat alone in her boudoir, had sorrowfully to reflect that this glorious feast, this delightful adventure must be given up.

"It can't be done," she said to herself. "Miss Peacock is on the watch. When Lavinia opens her sleepy eyes, they do open with a vengeance; and then Jessie ceases to be a lamb, and becomes a very lion of vigilance and terror. Then as to Star, now that she has given up the Penwernians, she will certainly split on us. It can't be done. I must see Maud; she must help me. Maud and I must both manage in such a way that no one shall find out. Florence, Ethel, and Emma must be spoken to; they must be told that the delightful feast is to be postponed."

Susan Marsh was the sort of girl who never took long in making up her mind. This happened to be Saturday morning; the next day was Sunday. The girls had a little more freedom on Sundays than on other days, and they regularly walked, two and two together, to the parish church at Tregellick. Susan wondered if by any possibility she could slip away from her fellows and convey a note to Florence Dixie with strict injunctions to give up all idea of visiting Penwerne Manor on the following Wednesday evening, and further telling her to put off Ethel and Emma Manners.

Susan felt very much frightened, and not at all sure that she could convey this note, but still she resolved to have a good try.

As she sat and thought and made up her mind, Star Lestrange entered the boudoir. Susan looked up sullenly when she observed Star's bright face.

"Well, what is it?" she said. "What do you want?"

"I thought I'd like to have a little chat with you if you don't mind."

"I mind extremely," said Susan. "I don't want to have anything to do with you. A girl who could be so mean as to give up the Penwernians is unworthy of my notice."

"Oh, just as you please!" said Star. "I thought perhaps you would come and have cocoa with me in our boudoir; but if you don't care about it, never mind. I only wanted to tell you now that I have discovered absolutely and conclusively that it was not Christian Mitford who took the bill out of my purse."

"Oh!" said Susan, starting and turning very red. "And how did you find that out, pray?"

"Never mind how. I have found it out, and I thought I'd tell you. I don't want to say anything more just now."

Star immediately left the boudoir. Susan sat on, feeling very uncomfortable; for to be told that a certain thing had been discovered, the knowledge of which spelt ruin to her, Susan, was the reverse of quieting. She felt her head aching; her face flushed; her feet turned icy cold. She crept near to the fire, shivering all over.

"I'll be ill myself if this sort of thing goes on," she said to herself; and just then her dearest friend, Maud, walked into the boudoir.

"I thought I'd find you here," said Maud, speaking with some excitement.

She drew a chair forward and poked up the fire into a blaze.

"I wish we had some logs," she said; "they'd make the sparks flare up the chimney. It's going to be a bitterly cold night."

Susan made no answer.

"What's the matter with you, Sukey? Are you sulky?"

"I feel miserable enough," said Susan.

"You look it; you look perfectly dreadful. Do you know what I have heard? I have heard that Christian Mitford is much worse this evening. The doctor is with her now. Don't you think we are all a little hard on poor Christian?"

"Don't mention her name," said Susan passionately. "I hate her. I can't sit in the room with people who talk about her."

"Oh, isn't that very silly, and very unkind? She has done nothing, poor girl!"

"Oh, hasn't she? We were happy enough in the school until she came here."

"Well, there's no doubt that she is very ill. I thought that it was perhaps about her you were fretting. It's getting to be quite a weight on my conscience. If she gets the least scrap worse I shall surely have to tell myself."

"You'll have to do what?" said Susan.

Maud's words had roused her at last.

"Oh, dear! if I thought you were going against me—I don't know what sort of a school this is, but to have my own friends going against me—you and Mary Hillary and Janet—although somehow Janet doesn't count for much—I believe I shall go mad. I'm awfully unhappy, and I'm not at all well."

"You look anything but well, poor Sukey; your nose is so red and your eyes so swollen. I expect you have a bad cold."

"I have. I am going to be ill myself; I have shivers down my back."

"You'd best go to bed and get Jessie to cosset you up."

"I hate Jessie; I won't let her come near me."

"Well, shall I go and ask her if you may have a fire in your room? And I'll give you a hot drink. I can, you know, if they allow a fire in your room. I have got a pot of that black-currant jelly; I'll make you a smoking tumbler of black-currant tea. You'll soon be better."

"You are very kind, Maud," said Susan, who was intensely greedy, and to whom the thought of hot black-currant tea appealed most pleasantly. "But there!" she added, "that is not the worst; and that is not the way you can really help me."

"Well, tell me; I really am distressed to see you look so bad. Of course, Christian may soon get better; perhaps we needn't think about her at all."

"We must think about something else, but she's the cause. You know, of course, what Star said on Wednesday night."

"Star Lestrange? Rather! Why, the whole school is going on about it. But I don't believe she will do it."

"I know she will. I tell you there's great trouble, and it's all caused by that horrid Christian Mitford. For my part, I shall be glad if Star ceases to be a Penwernian; but she can do us much damage. There's a lot—a great lot—of mischief afoot, and we have got to be careful. You can't imagine how bitterly and cruelly Miss Peacock spoke to me. She even said that if anything else was found out I might not be allowed to come back to the school."

"Oh, Susy!" said Maud in a shocked voice, "she couldn't have said that. That would mean to ruin you for life. She couldn't have said it, Susy."

"She did, Maud; so you needn't wonder that I am troubled. I tell you what it is: you must and shall help me."

"I will if it is in my power, and if it isn't anything very wrong, for I'm tired of doing wrong. It makes you feel so uncomfortable and ashamed of yourself."

"This is putting wrong right, so I am sure you will help me. I know I have got a cold, and there isn't the most remote chance of my being allowed to go to church to-morrow. But you will go."

"We're allowed to go, just as we please, either to the chapel here or to the church at Tregellick," said Maud. "If the weather is as bad as it is at present you will have to go to the chapel, and I dare say I shall go with you. I have a bit of a cold myself."

"But you must help me; you must go to church at Tregellick, and you must manage to convey a letter from me to Florence Dixie or to the Manners' girls. You must do it, and no one else must find out."

"But can't you post it?"

"I dare not. Florence's father might find it and open it by chance; and then—then indeed the fat would be in the fire. And it would be equally dangerous to confide a letter to the post for the Manners' girls. Besides, the sooner they know the better."

"What have they to know?"

"Why, of course, that they are not to come to our feast on Wednesday."

"Not to come to our feast!" Maud stood up. "I suppose you don't mind Mary hearing," she said, as Mary Hillary entered the boudoir.

"I don't suppose I do. You will all know before the time. The strange girls can't come on Wednesday night, and we must convey the fact to them in such a way that we may not be discovered ourselves."

"Highty-tighty!" said Mary Hillary. "What does this mean? Not coming? But why shouldn't they come? I am sure there has been fuss enough preparing for them. And they promised to bring those delicious cakes and things. And it would be such screaming fun to have them with us for hours, and to send them away again, and dear Peacock to know nothing about it. I say, Susan, I don't see why you are running this show altogether. Why mayn't we have a word in it now and then?"

"As many words as you like afterwards," said Susan; "but they can't come next Wednesday. I tell you it would ruin us all; it would be discovered."

"It needn't be. Of course, I have heard that story about Star, and I call Star a mean sneak," said Mary. "But if we lock the door and remain fearfully quiet, and have our feast not in the front attic, but in the far-away attic at the back, which we can get at through the front attic—the one over the room where the kitchen-maid sleeps—why, not a soul will hear us, and they'll all think we are in bed. I am going to put a pillow, dressed exactly like me, in my bed, and the rest of you can do likewise, and Jessie won't know. Oh, we must—we must have our feast!"

Susan sat down again. Her face was hot and flushed; her eyes looked strange.

"They can't come," she said; and all of a sudden she burst into tears. "They can't come," she continued, "for it would ruin me. Oh, girls, girls, don't let me be ruined! I will be so kind to you both when I leave school. Father has heaps of money, and I'll make him take a country-house and have you to stay with me, and you shall ride my ponies. Oh, please help me now!"

"She's in great trouble, poor thing!" said Maud; "but I think she is frightening herself unnecessarily. What do you say, Mary?"

"I say this," answered Mary somewhat defiantly—"that, as we went into the thing, we ought to carry it through; and I am sure Janet Bouverie will agree with me. You have always been our head, Sukey, and on the whole we have put up with you, but what I say is this—don't blow both hot and cold. You asked the girls, and even if there is a spice of danger—and surely the greatest part of the fun is in that very fact—we ought to stick to our words."

"I won't—I won't!" screamed Susan. "Oh, you drive me mad!"

"Leave us, Mary," said Maud; "I will manage her."

Mary, with a look of contempt on her face, left the room.

Maud now knelt by Susan and did her best to comfort her. She did not find her task at all an easy one. Susan, who was thoroughly selfish, had been frightened out of her habitual self-control. There is no greater coward than the bully, and Maud could not help wondering why she had ever made a friend of this girl, as she knelt by her side, patted her hands, brushed back her hair, and did all she could to soothe her.

By and by the great gong sounded for evening prayers, and Susan, wiping away her tears and doing her best to recover her composure, followed Maud into the central hall. It was only occasionally, on Sundays and on special festivals, that the beautiful little chapel, which had been used in the olden time when Penwerne Manor was a priory, was lighted and warmed for Divine services; but on Sundays it was a perfect picture to see the girls and their mistresses in the lovely little place. Miss

Peacock always attended private chapel at the Manor, and many of the girls preferred it to any other church in the neighborhood.

Now, as usual, the great hall was used, and as usual the girls assembled. The electric light fell on their bright heads and graceful young figures. Miss Peacock mounted the little dais and read the evening lesson, prayed the evening prayer, and looked around her. Just for an instant her eyes rested upon Susan. Her tear-stained face and wretched appearance rather pleased the head-mistress than otherwise. The same thought that filled her mind occupied the minds of many of the girls present. Star felt inclined to pity Susan. Louisa Twining said to herself:

"Whatever the poor thing has done—and I'm sure I don't like her—she has plenty of heart."

And then the voice of the head-mistress rose in the stillness. After reading a brief lesson she knelt to pray. There was generally a hymn sung by all the girls, but on this occasion it was left out. Miss Peacock prayed the evening collect, then pausing, she said a few words in a solemn voice. These words startled each girl who listened to them. They were to the effect that God in His mercy might bless the means used for the recovery of dear Christian Mitford, who was lying dangerously ill.

A pin might have been heard to drop in the room when the head-mistress paused after these impressive words. She then finished her prayer and rose to her feet. The girls crowded round her, distress in their faces. Was it true? Was Christian really in danger?

"The doctor thinks badly of her," replied Miss Peacock. "He will stay in the house to-night. I have sent for a trained nurse; and Jessie and I will also watch in the sickroom. You must pray, my dear girls, you who love Christian and admire her for many things, as all those who know her cannot help doing; you also who have misunderstood her and made her life unhappy"—here the head-mistress's eyes fixed themselves for a moment on Susan's face—"all alike must pray to-night that God will spare her life. Her parents are far away; that is the saddest thing of all. Dear girls, 'more things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.'"

Miss Peacock hurried away, and the girls slowly left the hall.

At the opposite side of the bright corridor was the refectory, but scarcely a girl turned into it. They were all shocked and depressed. Susan uttered a smothered sob deep down in her heart. Maud and Mary suddenly pulled her away. They rushed up stairs, and all three entered Susan's room.

"Now you mustn't give way. Oh, of course, we can't stand this sort of thing much longer," said Maud.

Her words terrified Susan. "What do you mean?"

"That we ought to tell; we ought to tell what we know. We have given a wrong impression of Christian in this school, and if she dies I shall never forgive myself."

"You daren't tell," said Susan in a smothered voice. "If you do it will ruin me. Oh, I know she will be better in the morning; I feel she will. I will pray to God all night."

"Dare you?" said Mary suddenly.

"Oh, I dare—I dare anything. I know I am a wicked girl, but she mustn't die. We mustn't let her die. God will be merciful."

The girls talked together for a little longer. Finally Mary went away, and Susan and Maud were alone.

"I feel she will be better in the morning," said Susan. "Oh, dear, how I shiver, and how ill I am! I do feel perfectly wretched. I wish I might have my fire lit."

"I'll venture to break the rules for once," said Maud. "Here are some matches. I'll put a light to the paper, and the fire will blaze up, and you won't feel quite so miserable."

"I wish you would sleep with me to-night, Maudie. I am too frightened to sleep alone."

"All right; I don't care," said Maud, who felt herself that she would like some sort of company.

By and by the girls, a blazing fire in their room, lay side by side in Susan's little bed. Maud put her arms round Susan, who kissed her.

"You don't really think she will die, do you, Maud?"

"Of course not," said Maud; "but Miss Peacock would not speak as she does if she were not really frightened."

"And the doctor is staying here all night," said Susan. "And Miss Peacock herself means to stay up, and she has sent for a nurse. She must be very bad. Are you very frightened of death, Maud?"

"Yes, I think I am—a little bit. A little sister of mine died years ago, and I saw her after they put her into her coffin. She did not look like anybody else I had ever seen. I could not get her face out of my head for a long time."

"I wouldn't look at a dead person for the world," said Susan. "Oh, I do hope she won't die! I think I shall lose my senses if she does."

"She's good, you know," said Maud after a pause. "She's not a bit like either you or me. We made her very unhappy."

"We certainly did," said Susan. "She seemed so astonished; although, of course, what she did was——"

"What did she do?"

"I wish I could tell you; it would relieve my mind. Oh, how badly my head aches!"

"Do tell me, dear Susy; I am dying of curiosity. I can't help it; it is one of my failings."

"No, I won't, Maud; I could not bear it now that she is so ill. It is bad enough to have her like this without betraying her as well."

"Of course, if you won't," said Maud, and the two girls lay silent.

Maud was anxious, depressed; her conscience was pricking her with regard to Christian. But her anxiety and her depression were nothing at all compared to the terrible feelings that swept over Susan's brain. If Christian died, she felt that she could never hold up her head again; and yet even to save Christian's life she did not believe she could humble herself to the extent of confessing all her wrong-doing since Christian had come to the school.

Towards morning she became drowsy and dropped off asleep. Maud had long been sleeping peacefully by her side.

When the girls awoke little Jessie was looking down at them. Jessie's eyes were red as though she had been crying very much. Susan started up, her face turned white.

"Is she frightfully bad?" she gasped.

"Oh, I don't know," said Jessie. "The doctor won't say. She has been delirious all night, and is now asleep. I don't know what to think. I came to tell you both, dear girls, to dress very quietly, and not to make the slightest noise. All the girls in the White Corridor are to be moved to-day in order that she may have perfect stillness. The doctor says that her brain is very much affected. He cannot imagine what can have happened to her. He says she has got a terrible shock."

"Oh, dear!" said Susan.

"You don't look well yourself, Susan. Have you a cold?"

"Yes. My throat aches, and my eyes ache."

"Well, get up quietly, dear, and go downstairs. There will be big fires in all the sitting rooms, and the boudoirs will be made thoroughly comfortable. I am glad you had a fire last night, girls. Yes, we must hope for the best."

Little Jessie bustled away. Susan and Maud began slowly to put on their things.

"There is one thing at least, Maud, that must be done," said Susan as she proceeded with her dressing. "That letter which I spoke of must be sent to Florence Dixie. Someone must go to church. You must do it, Maudie; you must do it for me."

"But I have a cold myself," said Maud.

"You must do it whether you have a cold or not. You will manage better than I, or I would do it. You must go to church. No one will notice you. You must say you want specially to go this morning. You will do this for me, won't you, Maud?"

"I don't know. I don't see why I should do it for you."

"Why, think—think for yourself what would happen if they were to come now. Really, girls like Florence Dixie and the Manners girls might easily know nothing about poor Christian's illness. This is Sunday; Wednesday will be here in no time. Think of their coming at present. Oh, Maud! you would be expelled as well as I."

"Do you think so?" said Maud, turning pale.

"I am sure—certain of it. We should all be made examples of—we three at least; Janet isn't quite so much in it."

"If that is the case I will make an effort," said Maud.

Susan proceeded more cheerfully with her dressing after this remark of Maud's; and presently, their toilets completed, the girls ran downstairs.

Then Susan, taking an opportunity when no one was looking, wrote a brief note to Florence Dixie. It ran as follows:

"Dear Florry: You and the Manners girls must on no account come on Wednesday. Don't attempt it, as you love me. I can add no more. From your friend,

"Susan Marsh."

When Susan had finished her letter she folded it up. Outside the little three-cornered note she wrote, "Be sure you burn this when read"; and then she put it into a small envelope, which she stuck down. A minute or two later she had thrust her note into Maud's hand.

"Put it into your pocket, and don't fail to deliver it. Oh! it will be a relief when you have managed this, Maud."

Maud nodded her head.

That morning Miss Peacock, contrary to her wont, did not appear at family prayers; but Miss Forest, the English teacher, took her place. Christian was again prayed for. The bulletin with regard to her state was a little worse, if anything, than it had been on the previous night. All the girls felt terribly depressed. They could not set to their accustomed Sunday work. Susan glided to a seat by the fire in the boudoir with a book; the others wandered here and there, not knowing what to do with themselves. Presently Jessie came down.

"Miss Peacock says that there will be prayers as usual in the chapel," she said, "and she hopes that all the girls who are sufficiently well will go there in good time."

Maud raised her head. She also was pretending to read. Susan gave her one agonized glance. Maud rose slowly and went towards Jessie.

"Do you mind, Jessie," she said, "if I go to church at Tregellick?"

"But, my dear, Miss Peacock says that none of the girls are to go to the village church to-day."

"Only I should like to go; I like Mr. White's preaching so much."

Miss Jessie hesitated. "Well, I'll ask Miss Peacock," she said. "You must on no account go without her leave. She is in the room with Christian now, but I will ask her if I have an opportunity. Does anyone else want to go to the church at Tregellick?" she added, looking round at the assembled girls.

Jane Price and one or two other girls said that they would like to go to the village church; and Jessie, with four names entered in her little notebook, went upstairs.

She presently returned to say that Miss Peacock would allow the girls to go church in the village if they went straight there and straight back and did not speak to anyone.

"Remember, Miss Peacock trusts you," said Miss Jessie. "She is so distressed and miserable that she can scarcely think of anything, and there is no teacher able to be spared to go with you this morning. She trusts you to behave well, to speak to no one, and to come straight home again."

"Oh, I'll take care that they speak to no one," said Jane Price. "Appoint me the guardian of this party, won't you, Miss Jessie?"

"Very well, Jane. You are a nice, steady girl; you will see to the others."

Jessie bustled from the room.

"Now then, you have got to obey me," said Jane, with a laugh.

A minute or two later Maud passed Susan's chair. Susan bent towards her and whispered in her ear:

"You are a brick to have spoken out. I won't forget this to you in the future."

Star was one of the girls who elected to go to Tregellick church. She was too restless to stay within the grounds, and any chance of a walk outside appealed to her.

There were six girls altogether who started off in time to say their prayers in the little gray church in Tregellick.

Mr. White was an excellent preacher, and it was always a treat to Star to listen to him. There were two pews in the church set apart for the Penwerne Manor girls, and they entered these now. The church happened to be specially full that morning. Maud, who found herself between Jane Price and Star Lestrange, presently looked around her. It was necessary that she should see Florence Dixie. She hoped that as they were going out of the church she might have an opportunity of slipping a note into the girl's hand without anyone noticing her.

Jane Price, who was the leader of the little party, would on no account allow her to speak to Florence. But Florence was aware that she was not supposed to know any of the Penwerne Manor girls, and she was extremely proud of her secret acquaintance with more than one of them.

Florence and her mother, an extremely vulgar, overdressed woman, generally sat in a pew just in front of those used by the schoolgirls. When they got to the church Jane went into the second pew; but Maud without making any comment, ensconced herself in the first one. Jane wondered at this, but she nodded to her companions, and they all entered the first of the two pews;

and Maud, as has been stated, found herself between Star and Jane.

Florence glanced round once and fixed her eyes on Maud's face. She had not made the acquaintance of any of the other girls present, and on no account would she pretend to know any of them. But Maud colored when Florence's eyes glanced at her.

The service went on. The singing was better than ever. Christian was prayed for in church, at Miss Peacock's special request, and at last the service came to an end.

"Now, girls, let us hasten home," said Jane. "Just let us walk out, two and two, as fast as ever we can, and glance neither to right nor to left, and get back to the Manor in good time for early dinner."

She whispered this in a somewhat loud voice to Maud, who nodded her head, but could not help replying:

"I wish you wouldn't talk so loud in church."

Jane tossed her head and looked angry.

"Follow me," she said.

Star, who was looking thoroughly depressed, followed quite meekly; then came Maud. But no, she would not go now. On purpose she knocked down a prayer-book.

"Go on," she said to the girl next to her, and the girl went on. Maud was a long time on her knees finding the prayer-book. Presently she put it in its place. All the girls had now gone with the exception of Maud herself. Florence lingered, she scarcely knew why. Maud bent towards her.

"Take it," she said, "and say nothing."

Florence covered the note with her prayer-book; and, thoroughly relieved, and suddenly in excellent spirits, Maud left the church.

But her good spirits were not of long duration. Outside the church Star stepped back and spoke to her.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

"Do what?" asked Maud, considerably startled.

"Of course, I saw you knock down that prayer-book on purpose. Why did you give that girl—Miss Dixie, I think you call her—a note?"

"I didn't," said Maud at once.

"You did. I shall tell Jane Price."

"Oh, what a horror you are!—a tell-tale and all the rest. Besides, it isn't true."

"It is true," said Star; "I saw you do it. What is the matter, Maud? There is a sort of conspiracy going on in our school. We are all fearfully unhappy, and I can't conceal things any longer. I can't and I won't."

"Oh, please—please don't tell Jane. Indeed—indeed I didn't do anything."

"Maud, if you deny it again I will tell Jane, and this instant."

"Well, I'll say nothing."

"You must come to me to-day to my boudoir. I shall ask to have it to myself, and only you and Susan shall come. I'll get to the bottom of this thing. Now, you understand."

Maud put on a wry face.

"I won't talk to you any more at present; I despise you," said Star.

She ran on and joined Jane Price.

"What's the matter with you, Star? You don't look too happy."

"Nor would you be if you had a weight on your mind which was reducing you to abject misery," was Star's response.

"Are you really so fond of Christian?"

"Who wouldn't be fond of a girl who was made ill at the school all because she had been unkindly treated—a girl who is quite uncommon in herself? I can't make out what is the matter, Jane. I am thoroughly wretched."

"You look it, Star. I never saw your face so perplexed. What were you saying to Maud?"

"Giving her a bit of my mind. I don't like her."

"I like her better than Susan," whispered Jane in response. "Well, here we are," she added as they arrived at the well-known gates, "and I have kept my word: no one has spoken to anyone, or done a single thing that Miss Peacock would disapprove of."

"Oh, haven't they?" said Star to herself; but she was silent.

Just before they all went in to dinner Susan ran up to Maud. She took her friend's hand and spoke eagerly.

"Have you done it?" she whispered.

"Yes; but I don't think I have mended matters."

"What do you mean?"

"Star saw me do it."

"Maud! Well, you really are the most awkward, most incapable—— Oh, you are a terrible girl!"

"I denied it, but she stuck to it. I just got her not to tell Jane Price, but she means to have it out with us both this afternoon. We are to meet her in the fourth class boudoir, and she means to be there alone. I never saw Star so determined. I expect we shall have a fight."

"It seems to me I don't care about anything," said Susan. "I think I'll run away. Father couldn't turn me out if I went home; only I haven't got enough money. Have you any you could lend me, Maud?"

"To run away and leave me behind?" said Maud. "Indeed, that I haven't. Don't be a goose, Susy; we have got to face this thing and pull ourselves through somehow. I tell you what."

"Yes?"

"Let us confide in Star; let us tell her just everything. It's about the best thing to do. She's the sort of girl who'd be desperate and cruel if she were kept in the dark; but if she knew, why, she mightn't."

"And you want me to tell—me—that I opened her purse and took the bill out, and laid the blame on Christian. You think she'll bear it."

"I don't know," said Maud. "It seems to me she'll find out whether you tell her or not. Oh, by the way, what is the news of Christian?"

"The doctor says the crisis will come to-night. Jessie is in a fearful state of anxiety. We have none of us seen Miss Peacock for a minute to-day. You never knew anything like the gloom of the chapel. I cried all the time. The other girls quite pitied me. Mr. Dalzell preached a sermon about schoolgirls and their temptations. I think Jessie and Miss Peacock must have been sneaking and telling him things he ought not to know. The girls looked at me a lot. I cried harder than ever. Oh, dear! oh, dear! what a wretched creature I am!"

"We are all wretched, it seems to me," said Maud. "The sooner we got out of this depression the better." Susan made no reply.

The great gong was not allowed to be sounded that day, but Jessie came to say that dinner was ready, and the girls marched into the hall.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CLEW TO THE MYSTERY

SUNDAY can be the most delightful or the most wretched day in the world. When the heart is at peace, when the sun shines brightly, and things are going well, how sweet are the golden hours; how joyful and tuneful does the church bell sound; how soothing and stimulating to the highest part of our nature are the hymns and the church services! There is rest all round, and we feel it through and through our natures.

But there are other Sundays, again, which are just as miserable. There is the terrible ache in the heart; there is gloom over everything, and the cessation of customary occupations but increases this tenfold.

Christian, although a comparative stranger in the school, was now the one object of interest. She was thought of so much that there was little or no time to remember anybody else, and but for Star both Susan and Maud would have been allowed to have been as miserable and as naughty as they liked without anyone remarking them.

But Star, as she expressed it afterwards, felt almost vindictive that day. All that had gone before, and the wretched consequence of her own act of folly and unkindness in believing that Christian was guilty of the most disgraceful conduct, now caused her sensitive conscience to accuse her loudly. The best way to relieve herself was to put Christian right. She could only do this by forcing Susan and also Maud to confess. Star knew very well that a special and very daring rebellion was to take place in the front attic on the following Wednesday. Its nature she had not the slightest idea of. She herself, as she said, would no longer be a Penwernian. She would not attend the secret meeting. But that did not prevent her from being intensely unhappy about it. It was on account of that that Christian had broken the rules. Christian had been sent to Tregellick and had spent her money at Dawson's shop, and she had brought in food, and paid a bill there. Susan and Maud and Mary Hillary and Janet Bouverie had incited her to this act of rebellion. They were the real culprits; Christian was little more than a tool. Ill as Christian now was the conspiracy had not ceased to exist. There was no doubt whatever on that point. Star did not intend to make any more fuss—she was too broken-down for that—only she saw Maud with her own eyes knock down the prayer-book in church. It had not been done by accident; Star's quick eyes had detected Maud in the act. The prayer-book had been deliberately dropped on the floor. This aroused the little girl's suspicions. She saw Maud stoop down, and she herself was obliged to leave the pew. She looked back. Maud had risen, and she was bending towards a vulgar, showy-looking girl, in the pew just in front of her, the very name of whom Star did not know; and she gave the girl something—something in the nature of a letter. There was no doubt of it.

"It is the clew to the mystery," thought Star. "Now I will be firm. Now I intend to be what they call cruel. It is the clew to the mystery. I will find out. Christian lies at death's door; she is dependent, perhaps, on me to save her life."

After dinner Star sped very quickly upstairs. She went on tiptoe. When she reached the neighborhood of the White Corridor she took off her shoes. Then she glided along towards the door of the sickroom. It was very slightly ajar. Star peeped in. It so happened that Miss Peacock, who had been up all night, and was now worn out with anxiety, lay sound asleep in the arm-chair by the fire. Jessie was downstairs having her dinner. Neither was the nurse present. Star could look in at Christian. And it so happened that Christian looked back at Star; and although her face was white as death, and there were startling great shadows under her eyes, and although that same little face was not only white but strangely pinched, she recognized Star, and it seemed to Star that her eyes brightened and her lips moved in a sort of voiceless appeal.

This was enough for the little girl. Silently, without making the least vestige of noise, she glided across the floor and up to the sick girl's bed.

"Darling!" said Star.

Now, in all the world there could never be a more thrilling voice than Star Lestrange could assume when she chose. And the love now in her voice, and the pity, and the longing to make reparation penetrated straight down to the heart of the girl who was slowly but surely drifting out on a nameless tide.

It seemed to Christian, as she floated and floated on that deep, deep sea, that a hand took her and passed round her and drew her back and back. She looked up at Star, and the faintest of faint smiles awoke in her eyes.

"I mean to put everything right," said Star again; and then she said "Darling!" once more, and then like a feather she brushed Christian's forehead with her lips, and then she left the room.

Christian lay motionless when Star had left her. What had happened? Was there, after all, anything to be very sorry about? Why did she drift and drift? The noise as of great waves was in her ears, and her heart beat with heavy throbs. What was the matter? After all, was it pleasant to drift out away from all the people on the shore who beckoned to her to return? Was not her father there? And did not his eyes, and his lips, and his whole strong presence say, "Come back to me—come back"? And mother? Mother was beside him, and mother also said, "Come back." And, oh, there were other friends, and they seemed to love the girl who was drifting away, and they all said, "Come back, Christian." But Christian said feebly—oh! so feebly that her words could scarcely be heard even by them—"I go out; it is better to go out." And then another voice said, "Darling!"

That voice, so piercing and strong, had a clarion note in it; and it seemed to Christian that she stopped drifting, and that she turned, and strong arms were stretched out, and she came back, but so slowly—so slowly.

Little knowing what she had done, and that she had in reality saved Christian's life, Star Lestrange ran downstairs. Her cheeks were burning; her heart was on fire. She went straight to the boudoir.

"Girls," she said to one or two of her friends, "may I have this room to myself for an hour if necessary?"

"Of course, Star, dear," they answered. They loved her, and would do anything for her.

One of the girls wanted to question her, but she refrained.

"Go away, then," said Star; "there's no time to be lost."

"How is Christian now?" asked a girl.

"Don't ask me," answered Star.

She entered the pretty little boudoir, placed a couple of chairs near the fire, and then waited.

"They will come; I know they'll come," she thought. "I will force them to come. I'll think of them until they must come.'"

She had never been so determined in the whole course of her life before. The fire in her eyes seemed to get brighter. After a time she heard footsteps—lingering footsteps. Then the curtain was pushed back and the face of Susan Marsh looked in. And Susan followed her own face into the room, and Maud came behind her.

"There's a door," said Star briefly; "you had best shut it."

Maud shut the door.

"Now then," said Star, "I'm going to get to the bottom of this, and I have got to be cruel if necessary. I don't mind about either of you, even if it means that you are expelled. I want to save Christian, and to put her into a position of honor, and I want you two to tell me just the very truth."

Susan gave a slow laugh. "You are rather ridiculous, Star," she said. "What do you accuse me of?"

"I accuse you," said Star briefly, "of having taken my purse when Christian was asleep, and of having opened it and taken out the little bill which Dawson gave Christian when she paid for the goods."

"And why, pray," said Susan, "do you accuse me of this crime?"

"Because I know you have done it," said Star.

"You are quite mistaken; I did not do it."

"Maud, do you know anything of this?" said Star.

"I know nothing," said Maud.

She did know, but she and Susan between them had resolved on no account to tell.

"Very well," said Star. "I thought perhaps you'd tell me. I thought it quite the best thing to do. We won't talk any more of this at present."

Susan looked at her now in some astonishment. This was a course of proceeding that she had not expected.

"I have another thing to talk of," continued Star. "You, Maud Thompson, went to church to-day, and you knocked down a prayer-book on purpose. I saw you take it and fling it on the floor, and then you gave a note to a girl—a showy-looking, black-eyed girl—who sat in the seat before you. You did it, because I saw you."

"I did not do it," said Maud.

"All right, then; I shall go and speak to the girl herself."

"Star!"

There was an amazed cry from both girls.

"I shall go and speak to the girl herself," repeated Star.

"You can't," said Maud, with a laugh, which in spite of herself was extremely nervous, "for you don't know her name."

"I shall find it out. I am going to her now; don't keep me."

Star brushed past the two and left the room. She was carried along on a wave of keen excitement. It did not matter to her any longer what anybody thought of her conduct. Susan, left behind, looked wildly at Maud for a minute.

"I must stop this at any cost," she said. "She mustn't—she daren't—she shan't go!"

Out of the boudoir flew Susan. In the passage she met Miss Forest.

"Oh, Miss Forest, dear, do you mind if we all go for a walk? I mean outside the grounds."

"What do you mean, Susan? Certainly not. There are no teachers to take you to-day. If you wish to walk, walk in the grounds. Now, don't worry me."

"Do you mean to say positively that no girl is to go outside the grounds to-day?"

"I do say it."

"No girl? Are there no exceptions?"

"None. What nonsense you talk! Any girl who goes outside the grounds to-day will be severely punished."

"Of what nature will the punishment be, dear Miss Forest?" asked Susan. "Please tell me, for sometimes I think a little punishment is worth enduring for the sake of the pleasure."

"Really," said Miss Forest, her eyes flashing, "the insubordination in this school must be put a stop to with a firm hand. You, I verily believe, are the ringleader, Susan Marsh. Notwithstanding our anxiety and the serious illness of Christian Mitford, I take it upon myself to say that the girls who disobeys and leaves the school this afternoon will be put into solitary confinement and not allowed to speak to her schoolfellows for at least twenty-four hours."

"Thank you," said Susan. She dropped a little mock courtesy and ran away.

Just at that moment Star, in her hat and Jacket, appeared. Susan, who had gone down the whole length of the corridor, now stopped to watch what would happen. Miss Forest, terribly aroused, turned to Star.

"Where are you going?" she said.

"For a walk."

"In the grounds?"

"No," said Star. "Please—I wanted to ask your permission—please, I want to go into the town."

"You can't go, Stella. I have just said that no girl is to leave the grounds to-day."

"Oh, please, this is so important!"

"I can't help it. You girls think you are so wise, and you are nothing of the sort. Walk in the grounds, and please don't argue the point. The girl who ventures outside without permission shall have twenty-four hours of solitary confinement. There now! I am determined; I can't stand this spirit of insurrection any longer."

Star said nothing. She moved slowly down the corridor. At the corner she saw Susan.

"Ah! Yah!" said Susan. "I thought I'd take the wind out of your sails."

"You have done nothing of the sort," replied Star.

She continued to walk steadily along the corridor. Presently she reached the end. At the end was a door. She opened it and went out. It led into the garden. Star walked quickly. Susan came and planted herself at the door. Maud stood by Susan's side. They saw Star walk along the garden path, then stop short and turn abruptly to her left.

"She's going to defy Miss Forest. Who will believe her now?" said Susan. "Come, let us watch her, Maud; let us watch her."

They scampered down the path until they came to the place where Star had turned off. They now saw Star open the wicket-gate near the lodge and disappear on to the high-road.

"Ah, now we've caught her!" said Susan. "Now she's in for it."

Meanwhile Star, with the flame of fire which Christian's face had awakened in her heart still blazing brightly, pursued her way.

Wrong! Of course she had not done wrong. She had done the only right thing in all the world.

"I must bring it home to them," she thought. "The thing must be explained. There is a serpent in our midst. I must get the obnoxious creature out of the school."

She walked faster and faster. Presently she reached Tregellick. Then it suddenly occurred to her that she did not know the name of the girl to whom Maud had given the letter, so she could not get the information out of her. But, of course, the little sextoness could tell her the name.

As Star entered the straggling High Street of the small town she heard the bell in the gray church-tower begin to sound again. There was about to be a service. Star felt that she must go to church. This, of course, was also strictly against rules, for the girls were not allowed to go to church in the town unbidden or unaccompanied by an escort.

"As it is all disobedience, I may as well disobey thoroughly and find out what I want to find out," thought Star.

She entered the church. Just as she did so the bell stopped. The sextoness motioned to her to go up to her own pew, but Star shook her head.

"Put me in a pew close to the door; and I want to speak to you afterwards," she said to the woman.

The woman obeyed. She knew Star well by appearance, but she wondered to see a Penwerne Manor girl out alone.

The afternoon service was short. Star watched the worshipers with intentness. How relieved she was when she saw the black-haired, dark-eyed girl take possession of her pew! She came in on this occasion unaccompanied by the stout woman who had sat with her in the morning.

By and by the service came to an end. It is to be feared that Star did not much attend to her prayers. The worshipers filed out. Star fixed her eyes on the face of Florence Dixie. Florence was attracted by Star, although she did not know the reason, but she was surprised to see her, a Penwerne Manor girl, out alone. She longed to stop and speak to her, but of course she did not dare. Star, however, had made up her mind.

Quick as thought she followed the black-eyed girl out of church. The girl looked back when she heard footsteps coming after her. When she saw Star she stopped.

"What is the matter?" she said.

"I want to know your name," said Star in a polite voice. "I hope you won't think me very rude, but I should be greatly obliged to you if you would tell me your name."

"My name!" said the girl, with a slight laugh. "Well, I'm not ashamed of my name; it's Florence Dixie."

Star now came up to her side.

"Where do you live?" she asked. "I am so awfully obliged to you for telling me your name; but where do you live?"

"You must be a very ignorant girl," replied Florence, "not to know where I live and who I am. Father is the only lawyer in the place. His house is the big brown house that you see yonder at the top of the High Street. May I ask your name, Miss—Miss——"

"My name is Lestrange," said Stella. "I live at the Manor; I am one of the schoolgirls."

"Oh, of course, Miss Lestrange; I know you by appearance quite well. You often come to church. I was surprised to see you there this afternoon alone."

"Yes; I came out this afternoon alone. I am tired," said Star.

Quickly a thought flashed into Florence's brain; what a tremendous triumph it would be for her to bring this charming, aristocratic-looking young lady home to tea.

"I wonder now," she said, dropping her voice and suiting her pace to that of Star, "if you'd honor us, Miss—Miss Lestrange. We are having tea at home just now—high tea. And my brothers, Rufus and Jasper—they're such pleasant boys—they're always at home to tea on Sundays. You say you are tired. It's a good long walk back to the Manor; would you honor us by having a cup of tea with us?"

"I should be very much obliged," said Star.

At another time such a request would have horrified her, but it seemed to her now the only means to a desirable end.

"I am glad; mother will be so pleased," said Florence. "We all think a great deal of Miss Peacock and her wonderful school, Miss—Lestrange."

Florence always made a slight pause between "Miss" and "Lestrange," and at another time Star would have used her ventriloquist voice and have said just above Florence's startled ear, "A little faster, please;" but she was not in the mood to be funny at this moment, and walked in silence by her companion's side.

"I know I must get her to tell me just by guile," thought the little girl; "and it's so difficult, and it seems to get more difficult each minute."

Presently they reached the house. Florence pulled the bell, and the door was opened by a rough-looking, red-headed boy, who shouted when he saw Florence; and then, as he beheld Star's beautiful, refined little face, his own features subsided into a startled grin.

"I have brought home a young lady from the Manor," said Florence in her most affected and mincing way. "Are they all at tea, Rufus?"

"Of course we are, Flo. And mother's ever so cross, I can tell you. You had better take the lady upstairs."

" Well, perhaps," said Florence dubiously, looking at Star.

" Oh, please don't!" said Star; " I can't wait a minute. I can't really. I'll just have a cup of tea, as you were so very obliging as to ask me, and then perhaps afterwards you would walk a little of the way home with me."

" Oh, as to that, I'm sure I'll be delighted," said Florence. " You don't know how I have been longing to know you."

Just then the dining room door opened and Mrs. Dixie put her head out.

" Florence, you naughty girl——" she began, but then she saw Star and changed her manner. " Oh, my dear child! you are late. And who is your nice little friend? Welcome, my dear—welcome."

" Mother," said Florence, " this is Miss Lestrange, one of the young ladies from the Manor. She was at church, and I have invited her home to have a cup of tea."

" Honored, I'm sure," said Mrs. Dixie. " Come this way, miss."

She threw the dining room door open and ushered Star into a noisy scene. Mr. Dixie was certainly not a refined-looking man. He was sitting far back in a deep arm-chair, with one rough, spoilt-looking little girl on his knee, and another perched upon the arm of the chair.

" Now, dad," said one of his small daughters, " I'm going to pull your right whisker."

" And I'm going to pull your left," said the other.

When Star came in she saw Mr. Dixie having his fiery whiskers violently pulled by the firm, somewhat dirty hands of the small girls.

" Oh, I say! let me alone and behave yourselves," he said, dropping them to the ground.

They both set up shrieks of indignation, and Star was motioned to a chair at the table.

"Here, Robert," said Mrs. Dixie; "this is one of Miss Peacock's young ladies. Rufus, do clear a place; brush away those crumbs, and then go out to Maria and tell her to bring in fresh tea."

"She's out, mother," said Rufus, not attempting to stir and not removing the crumbs.

"Oh, dear, I'm so sorry!" said Mrs. Dixie. "We look upon it as such an honor having you here, miss. We think an immensity of any of the Manor young ladies."

"Miss Peacock is one of the finest, proudest, grandest women I have ever met, said Mr. Dixie. "Have a seat, miss. Here, Rufus; go out and bring in some more tea."

"I say Maria is out," said Rufus. "Who's to make the tea?"

"Make it yourself, and be quick about it."

Rufus caught up the family teapot and disappeared from the room, banging the door after him.

"How is it, dear," said Mr. Dixie, turning to his spouse, "that we always have ditch-water instead of tea on Sunday evenings?"

"Don't blame me, Robert," said the good lady. "It isn't to be wondered at. When eight spoilt children each want the strongest and the best, what can be left for a stranger? Florence, you might have told us that you were going to honor us with Miss Lestrange's company."

Poor Star! she had been trying to do her best, but it seemed to her that she was getting deeper and deeper into hot water each moment. What madness had seized her when she had hinted to Florence Dixie that she would like to go home with her? Already she had broken a rule of the school—a rule just expressed when they were all in trouble, and Miss Peacock was specially to be cared for and loved and honored. Oh, if she might only go home again!

After a great deal of squabbling and difficulty, and a great many words passing between one Dixie and another, a cup of tea which had been made in the kitchen was brought in and placed before Star. Scalding hot as it was, she drank it off, and then rose hastily to say good-by.

"I am very much obliged to you," she said to Mrs. Dixie.

Mr. Dixie accompanied her to the door; and Florence, feeling intensely important, went with her into the street.

"I'll walk all the way back with you if you like, Miss Lestrange."

But Star by no means wished for this.

"Surely you would not be allowed to be out so late," she said.

"Oh, mother wouldn't mind. I mean, under ordinary circumstances she'd mind very much; but I can assure you she is exceedingly proud that I should know you. I know one or two of the girls as it is——"

Here Florence paused and bit her lips. She knew that she ought not to have admitted that.

"I know one girl you happen to know," said Star, looking at her intently. "Her name is Maud Thompson. She handed you a note to-day after church."

"Oh, no, indeed she didn't!" said Florence, instantly on the defensive, and determined, as she said afterwards to Maud, to guard her at any expense.

"I saw her do it. I thought perhaps—— Oh, I must confide in you a little bit. I came to church on purpose. I wanted to see you on purpose. Please don't say what isn't true. We are in great trouble at the Manor just now."

"Are you?" said Florence. "And do you mean to tell me? I can't tell you how I love exciting stories. I have always pined to go to a first-class school. Over and over again I've said to father, 'If only you would send me to Miss Peacock's!' But father thinks Miss Peacock too much of a fine lady; he says she's affected."

"No, she isn't," said Star. "She is a lady, that is all."

"What a nice way you have of talking, Miss Lestrange! And you are so pretty, too! Oh, I am interested in you and your school! I don't mind a bit what father says. He is just eaten up with jealousy; that's a fact. If Miss Peacock would employ him as her lawyer, father would think her the most delighful woman in the world. As it is, of course, he is jealous. He'd give his eyes to have me admitted into the school. He said so once; he said he'd pay double fees if Miss Peacock would have me. Oh, I should so love it! All the other girls would be mad with jealousy. Now, there are the Manners girls. You don't know them, do you, Miss Lestrange?"

"No."

"Well, they're not really in our class of life at all. I sometimes think it rather trying that I should be expected to know them. They are the daughters of that greengrocer who owns the huge shop just round the corner. Oh, and here they are coming to meet us! They'll want me to introduce you. Do you mind?"

Star said she did not mind. In her heart of hearts she felt that she could scarcely know a more vulgar or common girl than Florence.

"If you will only tell them the truth, that I came to church because I wished to speak to you, I don't mind what else you do," said Star.

The Manners girls came up slowly. They were thin, with straw-colored hair, very pale complexions, and small, weak-looking eyes. They were showily dressed, and in some ways looked even more commonplace than Florence. When they saw her they made a rush towards her. Then the younger one drew back a little, and it was the elder Miss Manners who came trippingly up to the two little girls.

"I have come in person to answer you, Florence. As you have got the note—I mean the one Miss Thompson gave you——"

"Oh, hush, hush!" said Florence. She could not have grown any paler than she did at that moment.

Star moved a step or two away from her.

"You told me just now——" she began.

"I did—I did! Don't speak to me for a minute, Miss Lestrange. I must walk on with you just to explain myself."

"Can I endure it?" thought Star. "And yet I must, for I must find out what has really happened."

"Of course I got the note," said Florence the minute they were alone; "but I was not going to tell, for poor Maudie didn't wish it. Now you know, however, you will take her back a message. Will you say to her that I am going to speak to the Mannerses, and if we can we will comply with her wishes? You may tell her at the same time that we don't like people who blow both hot and cold. The sort of friends we appreciate are those who say a thing and do it whatever the consequences. You will tell her. Oh, I know you despise me. Some day you will understand that a girl of my sort hasn't a chance with a girl of your sort. But, all the same, there's some good in me. I like you just awfully, for instance. I think you are sweetly pretty; and you have got such—oh, *such* an air about you! You might be anyone. I know I'll dream of you to-night; I quite love you. You are fifty times nicer than Susan Marsh—although the Mannerses and I thought a lot of her—or than Maud Thompson, or than—— Oh, dear me! Miss Lestrange, I do wish you could get me into your school. You don't know how fine you'd polish me up; you'd show me that I ought always to speak the truth and everything else. Can't you try?"

Florence's bold face looked wonderfully soft at that moment, and there were actually tears in her black eyes. Star wondered she could speak to her, and yet when she looked again she felt touched by the expression on Florence's face.

"I am sorry for you, but I can't promise to—to help you to get into the school. All the same, I am sorry. You could not, I suppose, let me have that note. I wouldn't read it; I'd just give it back to Maud Thompson."

"My dear child," replied Florence, her manner instantly altering, and a hard, flippant tone coming into her voice, "I have not told you anything about the note. You asked me if I had got one, and I said 'No.' The Manners girls gave me away, and I was forced to confess that I had told a little white lie. White lies *are* allowable, aren't they?"

"They are not," said Star stoutly.

"Well, anyhow, they are amongst my set. As to the note itself, it was of such small consequence that I tore it up. Well, good-by. Glad to see you another day when you come to church and want a cup of tea."

Star looked back for a moment to where the Manners girls were standing; then she put wings to her feet and ran the rest of the way back to Penwerne Manor.

"What did she want? How is it you have got so chummy with her?" said Ethel Manners, turning to

Florence. "You did look upset when we met you! And didn't you blaze up as crimson as anything when we spoke of the note! Did we do wrong to speak of it?"

"You were just horribly nasty, Ethel," said Florence. "You might have known that when I was walking with a strange girl you two ought not to intrude. You don't know your places, and that's a fact."

"We're every bit as good as you are, Florry," said Emma. "It was only yesterday father said that your father and he used to chum together at the same school, but that he had pennies in his pocket and your father had none. Don't be a goose, Florry. Let's walk arm-in-arm. Wouldn't you like to come in and have a bit of supper? Aunt Phœbe said if we met you we might ask you. And there are sweetbreads for supper, and fried liver and bacon. You know how fond you are of those things."

"So I am," said Florence; "and I had such a wretched tea. It's awfully uncomfortable at home on Sunday; the kids make such a row all over the house. Our servant is out, and there's no one to look after anything."

"Well," said Emma, "Aunt Phœbe looks after things for us, and she loves something hot for supper. She's going to make pancakes, too; and we can have toasted cheese afterwards if we like."

"Oh, yes, and we can make coffee," said Ethel. "We are going to have a real jolly time. Will you come?—for if you don't, we'll ask Mary Ann Pomfret."

Mary Ann Pomfret was the one girl in the whole of Tregellick whom Florence detested.

"You can please yourself," she said. "I won't come near you if you have Mary, but I'd love to come to you alone. Your place always seems so comfy on Sundays."

"Then let's walk arm-in-arm," said Emma; and she ran round to Florence's left side, and Ethel took hold of her other arm, and in this fashion they walked up the High Street.

"I call it specially mean," said Ethel, "after we have made those lovely cakes and prepared all those things to give Susan and the other girls a right good time. There can be no earthly excuse in their not having us. Just because a girl—and a new girl—happens to be a bit ill."

"But they say she is very ill," said Florence. "She was prayed for in church twice to-day. What do you mean to do, Ethel?"

"Go, of course," said Ethel.

"Do you really mean it?"

"Certainly I do. I'm going. Aren't you, Emma?"

"I'll do whatever you do, Ethel," replied the younger sister.

"Then I have a good mind to join you," said Florence. "You know, to tell the truth, I'm not specially taken with Susan Marsh. I don't think she's a bit better than we are, only she just puts on airs because she's a Manor girl. Perhaps Maud Thompson is a wee bit better. But what a beautiful girl that was I walked with to-day—Miss Lestrange! She must be quite the beauty of the school. Hasn't she eyes like stars? And such a refined, sweet little face! She's very pretty; and oh, she's fetching!"

"She's a perfect beauty," said Emma.

"I don't say she's as good-looking as all that;" said Ethel; "but she is handsome, and has what I call an air about her."

"She's very different from Susan Marsh," said Florence. "I could be good to please a girl like that. I am sure she would hate our going to the school on Wednesday."

"Did she say anything about it?"

"Not a word; only she was awfully bothered about that note. I can't imagine why she should come sneaking round after it, as it were; but she did, and she looked so piteous when she asked me to give it back to her, and I had it snug in my pocket all the time. But of course I couldn't give it to her; it would be hard on poor Maud."

"So it would," said Ethel. "Well, here we are at home now. Aunt Phœbe will soon begin to fry the supper. I do feel starving!"

Ethel let herself and her companions into the house with a latchkey. They passed the great shop where the vegetables were sold, and the huge appleroom where the fruits were kept from Saturday night to Monday morning. Up the narrow stairs they went, until at last they found themselves in a broad, low, cheerful sort of room—a nondescript room, with a thick red felt carpet on the floor, and heavy red curtains to the windows, and a laughing, cheerful, blazing fire in the grate. Florence gave a sigh of relief.

"It is peaceful here," she said. "I wish we had a room of this sort at home."

After the girls had eaten their supper, they put their heads together and had a long and earnest consultation as to what they were to do with regard to the girls at Penwerne Manor. There was little doubt that they were all intensely disappointed. The Manor had seemed to them, ever since they could remember anything, as a sort of earthly paradise; the girls who walked in twos up and down the sheltered, cloister-like enclosures, the girls who came to church at Tregellick Sunday after Sunday, the girls who occasionally rode over the neighboring moors, the girls who went to the seashore in the summer and enjoyed themselves bathing or in little boats in the harbor, were all girls of a superior degree to those commonplace children in the town of Tregellick. They adored them; they envied them. The chance of getting into their midst was a golden and dazzling prospect, and they were intensely loath to give it up. It was Emma at last who seemed to come to a satisfactory decision.

"I tell you what," she said; "Susan has bound herself to receive us. We have put money into this thing; we have arranged to bring a good deal of the feast ourselves. Susan owes me seven and six——"

"And me five shillings," said Florence.

"And she has borrowed my best sash," said Ethel. "She said she would be very careful of it, and let me have it back at the first opportunity."

"I wonder you lent it to her," said Emma.

"She had such a coaxing way, and she said she wanted it so badly. In short, she made it a sort of condition with regard to giving us this pleasure."

"Oh, never mind that sort of thing now," said Florence impatiently. "I'll have to go back home very shortly or Rufus will be coming thundering round, making no end of a fuss. What shall we do, girls? That is the question. This is Sunday night; Wednesday is no way off at all. Are we to go and enjoy ourselves, or are we to meekly sit down and give up our bit of fun?"

"What do you think?" said Emma.

"I think we ought to go. I shouldn't hesitate a moment, only that poor Miss Lestrange looked so pleading, and she seems really fond of the sick girl. And if father found out by any chance that we'd been kicking up a rumpus in a house where a girl was dangerously ill, why, he'd never forgive me."

It was at that moment that Emma Manners came to the rescue with her dazzling suggestion.

"Well, don't let us go," she said. "Let us invite Susan Marsh, Maud Thompson, and the dear Miss Lestrange to have supper with us. Wouldn't that be jolly, girls? Let us give up all idea of the attic, and invite them to have supper with us here, and keep it a secret from everybody. We could have a gay time."

"But I couldn't come," said Florence. "How could I manage it?"

"Easily, for we'll ask you here to spend the night. Bless you! there'd be nothing secret about our supper. Father would be as pleased as Punch; and Aunt Phœbe will prepare *such* a meal! Then we'll be able to reflect all the remainder of our days on the delightful fact that we invited three of the Manor girls to supper, and were, in short, hail fellows well met."

"It does seem rather brilliant, and a good way out of the difficulty," said Florence. "Of course, it isn't as thrilling as creeping up by the garden wall, and getting down by a ladder at the other side, and then sneaking up by a ladder again just under the attic window, and creeping in, and finding the girls waiting for us and delighted to welcome us; but it is better than no fun at all."

"What I say is this," continued Emma: "when we have succeeded in bringing these girls here, Miss Peacock may be inclined to relax her rule, and to allow us to join the Penwerne Manor girls at their lessons."

"Don't you imagine that for a single instant," said Florence. "When I talked to-day to Star—oh, bless you! I don't call her Star to her face—she said we hadn't a chance. No, there's no chance of that; but it would be fun to know them. Now I must be off. How is the note to get there?"

"They always send to father's shop for vegetables," said Emma. "We'll give a note to Joseph, and tell him to bribe their man, Edwards, to give it into Susan's hands somehow to-morrow. Now then, who'll write the note?"

"You'd better write it," said Florence; "you've got a better scribble than I have."

Emma, feeling very conceited and important, seated herself by a table and wrote the following words:

"DEAR SUSAN MARSH, MAUD THOMPSON, AND STAR LESTRANGE" ["Don't I feel grand, talking to them by their Christian names?" thought the girl as she finished this portion of her letter, bending forward and squiggling her tongue into her cheek as she proceeded]:

"We are awfully sorry we can't have our fun, but sickness has to be respected. We'll agree to say nothing about it if you three will come and have supper with us on Wednesday night. You can easily manage, and we'll manage to get you home without any trouble. You see, the ladder that you were placing for us will do for yourselves, and you can get in by the attic window and creep to bed. Anyhow, that's your affair. Our affair is that you have got to come or my father and Florence's father will make a shindy, and then there will be—oh, yes, I can't help being vulgar—the fat in the fire. You will come, all three of you, and have supper with us here; and won't we give you a right jolly feast! Your affectionate friend, EMMA MANNERS.

"*P. S.*—If you come, we'll do everything in our power to help you three girls to hide up the fact that you were out once in a while in the middle of the night."

Emma's letter was much commented on and approved of by her companions. Finally, Florence went back to her own house, feeling that, on the whole, supper at the Mannerses' might be as amusing and instructive and fascinating as even the stolen feast in the front attic.

CHAPTER XXVII

GOD'S WILL

When Star reached home that evening she found the whole place in a sort of hush. Christian was asleep, and on that sleep all her future hung. If she awakened with her fever gone she would be extremely weak, but with great care she might be pulled through. The doctor himself sat by her bedside, his hand on her feeble, fluttering pulse. Miss Peacock also was in the room, and the professional nurse and Jessie occupied another of the white rooms just beyond. There was intense emotion all over the house. No one thought at that moment of anyone but the girl who lay, as it were, in the shadow of death. She was loved then as she had not been loved during her days of health. Each girl, as she sat with her companion, had something to say with regard to Chrisitan Mitford. One girl noticed how expressive were her eyes, and another said that she looked a perfect lady. Her class-mates were unanimous, too, in remarks with regard to her talents: she was so forward in all her studies; she was so imaginative; she wrote such brilliant little papers. Then her voice had such a magical quality in it; it stirred the heart; particularly when she read.

Some of the teachers who were resident in the house also stood and talked of the sick girl. "She would have done us credit," said Miss Forest. Professor French said he never heard a girl of her age read Paradise Lost as she did. He was very much impressed with her; he said she had the dramatic quality to a remarkable degree. "Well, well, it does seem sad!"

The teachers were evidently under the impression that Christian would not get well; but the girls—at least the greater number of them—could not bring themselves to believe this possible. Most of the girls had never seen death; consequently it seemed to them that to die one must be ill much longer, must suffer much more acute pain. They spoke in their ignorance, but all the same they acknowledged to a frightened fluttering at their hearts; and when one by one they stole upstairs to bed, they crept past Christian's room as though they might meet her ghost on the landing.

By and by Susan herself went up to bed. Star had not said a word to Susan since her return. Susan had not dared to question as to what had befallen Star when she went out. The act of disobedience was of no moment just then to the girls. Star was glad of this. She was so troubled and terrified about Christian that she forgot that she had been disobedient; she only regretted the time she had been absent from the house.

Susan as she went upstairs touched Maud on the shoulder.

"I can't sleep alone to-night," she said; "I should be frightened. Come and sleep with me, Maud."

Maud got up quietly. "As you like," she said.

"Oh, dear girls!" said Jessie as they were passing the refectory, "I know you are feeling it very much, all of you, but you mustn't break down; that would be the worst thing in all the world. I have got a lot of beautiful hot cocoa in jugs waiting for you. Come in and have a cup each."

"We may as well," said Susan, who seldom or never lost her appetite. She and Maud drank off a cup apiece of the nourishing, delicious drink, and Susan took up a thick piece of bread and butter. A few other girls followed her example, but the greater number shook their heads sorrowfully.

Jessie stood by the fire; her eyes were red and sunken, and her eyelids much swollen.

"Is she very, very bad?" said Susan at last.

Jessie gave her head a dismal shake.

"The doctor says she gets weaker and weaker."

"Is there no hope, then?" asked Maud, with terror in her voice.

"Oh, Maud! I don't know; I can't tell. All I know is that she can scarcely be worse and live; but the doctor does say that while there is life there is hope. That's about all."

"Oh, dear!" said Maud. She clutched Susan's hand.

They were just leaving the room when Jessie called them back.

"We are all going to pray that God may spare her," said Jessie. "There are to be prayers at midnight in the chapel. Any girl who likes to come will be welcome. Miss Peacock will be there, and she has asked Mr. Dalzell to come and pray with us."

"I don't think I'd care to go," said Susan; "that sort of thing frightens me very much."

Jessie said no more, and as Susan and Maud stole upstairs they saw other girls standing about in knots.

"Did you hear about the prayers in the chapel?" asked one.

"Yes," said Maud.

"Are you going?" asked a girl of Susan.

"No; not for all the world," said Susan. "It would terrify me into my grave."

She went upstairs, and Maud followed her. When they reached Susan's room Susan turned the key in the lock.

"Now then, thank goodness we're safe!" she said. "We'll get into bed and cover our heads up with the bedclothes, and pray that we may sleep all night. I'm horribly frightened. Aren't you, Maudie?"

"I think I'm more sorry than frightened," said Maud. "I wish we hadn't been so dreadful to her."

"Maud," said Susan, raising her voice to a pitch of agony, "you dare talk of that to-night? Why, it will drive me mad."

"But why did we do it, Susan? But for that she wouldn't be so ill."

"I don't believe you. Her illness has nothing to do with us. Oh, do let us get into bed! It is so dreadful to be up when *that* may be coming into the house."

"Death, you mean?" said Maud. "I never saw death."

"I did," said Susan, "when my mother died. But that was a long time ago; I can scarcely remember it."

"I don't want to see anyone who is dead," said Maud.

"Of course, you needn't see her—I mean if she does die. I wish father would send for us both. I have a good mind to write to him to-morrow. This is horrible; it makes me forget even that dreadful Wednesday. Thank goodness, Florence did get that note! But we won't worry about that now. Isn't it a comfort that the precious immaculate Star should have put her foot in it? She did, didn't she, when she went deliberately and broke Miss Peacock's command—and just when Miss Peacock was in such trouble?"

"Oh, yes," said Maud; "but I don't like thinking of people getting into trouble to-night. I feel sort of repentant. Don't you Susan?"

"Not I."

"You are hard, Susan. Do you mean to say you are not sorry that we have been so cruel to Christian?"

"I'm determined not to think of it," said Susan. "There now, I'm in bed," she continued, springing under the bedclothes as she spoke. "Let's be quick and put out the lights, and let's be quite still and go to sleep."

Meanwhile the rest of the girls, whose whole hearts were full of Christian and her serious illness, congregated in the chapel at the hour of midnight. The service was short, but very impressive. It consisted of nothing more than an earnest—most earnest—prayer from Mr. Dalzell that God would spare the young life now hovering on the brink of eternity; that He would do this for the sake of her parents, for the sake of her mistresses, and for the sake of her schoolfellows; also for her own sake.

"But perhaps," said Mr. Dalzell as he rose from his knees—"perhaps, my dear girls, it may be the will of God not to spare the life of Christian Mitford. It may be possible that her death may be just the most beautiful thing for her. I understand that the crisis will come to-night. The doctor says that she cannot continue in her present condition many hours longer. We shall know, therefore, the best or the worst in the morning; and even if it should be God's will to take that bright young spirit to Himself, you will remember, my dear girls, that there is goodness in His severity, and a Father's heart; and, beneath the terrible sorrow, a Hand of Love. Girls, it is your first experience—your very first—that so loving a Hand may have to deal the blow; but nevertheless I hope you will trust in the Heavenly Father."

Star was sobbing bitterly, as were also several of the other girls.

"Go to your rooms now," said Miss Peacock. "Your attitude to-night will be one long prayer that God's will may be done, and also that His judgment may be tempered with mercy."

CHAPTER XXVIII

GOOD NEWS

EARLY on the following morning a little figure in white might have been seen gliding from room to room all along the corridors where the Penwerne Manor girls slept. Softly door after door was opened and the little woman went in. She stood by the beds where the girls slept, and touched each young sleeper lightly on the shoulder. In many cases the girls were not asleep at all, but in others fatigue and sorrow had made them sleep soundly. To each and all Jessie had the same message to give:

" Christian is better. The crisis is past. The doctor now hopes that she will live."

The untold relief of her words brought a look of rapture to some faces, and sudden tears, which joy brought forth, to others.

Little Jessie went last to Star's room. She knew that in the whole of that house no one felt more keen anxiety than Star Lestrange. Jessie felt that she could stay with Star for a minute or two when she had given her message to the rest of the school.

When she opened the door Star was up. She turned quite a haggard face towards the little woman.

" Why, Star, my dear," said Jessie, " haven't you been to bed all night? "

" No," replied Star; " I couldn't sleep. I sat by the window, and then I knelt by the window, and then—and then—— Oh, Jessie, is she dead? Tell me the worst; don't keep me in suspense. Is she dead, Jessie? "

"No, Star. I have good news for you. Oh, my child, don't give way!"

For Star had suddenly flung herself face downwards on her little bed, and with arms outstretched over the bedclothes, had given way to a burst of uncontrollable tears.

"She will live," said Star, amongst her choking sobs. "Oh! tell me what the doctor says."

"She is better. She slept until three this morning; then she awoke with the fever gone, looking very calm, but, oh, so weak! We gave her nourishment by spoonfuls, and she fell asleep again. The doctor has gone home for a couple of hours; he will be back soon after ten o'clock. Of course, her state is terribly precarious; but now Dr. Tarbut thinks there is every reason to hope."

"Yes, she will live now," said Star. She rose suddenly to her feet. "Thank you, Jessie," she said.

She ran up to the little woman, flung her arms round her neck, and kissed her passionately.

"I love you, Jessie. You know it, don't you?"

"I do, Star. And if you could only guess how I love you!"

"You love us all. You are a sort of guardian angel in the school. Sometimes I think you are even nicer and more beloved than our dear Miss Peacock. How is she this morning?"

"She looks bad, but she is keeping up wonderfully. The relief of this change for the better in Christian is doing her more good than any medicine."

"Can I do anything to help, Jessie?"

"I was going to speak to you about that, Star. There will naturally be a sort of reaction in the school to-day. The girls suffered severely yesterday, and Miss Peacock is the last person in the world to forget that fact. She says that there will only be morning lessons, and even these are to be of a very light and easy character. In the afternoon you are all to go for drives. Miss Peacock has ordered wagonettes to be sent round for the purpose. Then she wishes you to go to bed early to-night. To-morrow, of course, the ordinary routine will prevail."

"That is just like Miss Peacock," replied Star.

Her face did not brighten as she thought of the programme. Again she laid her hand on Jessie's shoulder.

"What can I do to help?"

"We don't have monitresses in this school," said Jessie, "but if you would act as one in your own class and amongst the girls of the third division——"

"Oh, amongst those girls!" said Star.

"Do you object, dear?"

"I object to nothing, Jessie; but you know the girls who are in the third class—Susan, Maud, Janet, Mary. I don't like them. I have quarreled with them now, too."

"But you will not think of yourself to-day, Star."

"Indeed—indeed I will not. Don't stay now; you have plenty to do. Trust me to strain every nerve to help you and dear Miss Peacock."

"I will tell her so, Star. I will give her your message. I can scarcely tell you how she trusts you. She said this morning, 'Get Star Lestrange to help. You know how fond she is of the Sixth Form girls.' She says that you can be more useful than any of the others to-day. You will do your best, won't you, Star?"

Jessie left the room, and Star flung herself again on her knees. She uttered a brief, passionate, earnest prayer; a cry of pure thanksgiving rose from her heart. Then, finishing her toilet, she ran downstairs.

The relief in the school was intense; each girl looked softened and inclined to be amiable. The knowledge, too, that they were to go for a long drive was highly appreciated. Depressed spirits were lifted again on the wings of hope; in short, the girls became themselves once more.

Lessons went on without any special interruption or any special event occurring. No music was permitted, but the ordinary work proceeded with ordinary satisfaction. The doctor's carriage, however, caused a flutter in the breasts of many of the girls. Star looked at the girls of her own class, and also at the girls of the third class. Suddenly she rose.

"He is going now," she said; "but I mean to be very bold. I mean to go into the entrance-hall and question him."

There was an attempt at clapping hands under the tables; but at the word "Hush!" from Miss Forest the girls refrained.

"Star, where are you going?" said her teacher.

"I want to ask Dr. Tarbut how Christian is," was Star's response.

Miss Forest's face showed that she longed to hear as much as the girls did. She made no remark, and Star ran into the hall.

"How is she?" asked the little girl.

The doctor was just putting on his overcoat. He turned kindly towards her.

"Why, Miss——"

"My name is Star—Star Lestrange," said the child.

"And you are anxious?"

"We are all anxious," said Star. "Please let me know the very, very truth."

"It is this, Miss Star," said the doctor, and he put his hand on her shoulder. "This is the very, very truth. Your friend is doing *first-rate*. Now, remember she must not be startled; she must be kept absolutely quiet.

You must all recollect that there is a sick girl in the house, and you must on no account do anything to disturb her rest. She will be sleeping on and off the whole of the day, and very likely to-morrow, and for several days to come; and if no one disturbs her, I have not the slightest doubt that she will be quite well in a short time. But don't forget my message to you and the other girls: no noise, please."

"I'd cut my tongue out before I'd make any noise," said Star; and then she flashed a grateful, beautiful glance into the doctor's face, and ran back to her fellows.

Her news gave intense relief, and when the hour of recess came Christian was certainly the heroine, for no one else was talked about.

Morning lessons had come to an end; there was to be a hasty lunch, and then the girls were to start on their drive. The day was a most beautiful one for the time of the year, and they were all in good spirits.

Just as they were assembling in the hall, waiting for the wagonettes to come up, one of the servants, a housemaid who had been only a very short time at the Manor, darted into their midst and thrust a note into Susan Marsh's hand. The teachers were not present.

Susan grabbed the note, turned white, and thrust it into her pocket. Star had seen the transaction. She had not intended to drive in the same wagonette with Susan; she was looking forward to a peaceful time with Louisa Twining and some of her own special friends; but now she changed her mind.

The wagonettes came up, and Star pushed herself to the front.

"I am monitress," she said. "Will you, So-and-so, and So-and-so"—she mentioned a few names—"get into that wagonette?"

The wagonette was quickly filled. It drove a little way down the avenue to wait for the others. The next wagonette came up and also received its load of girls, and finally the fourth and last arrived at the door.

"Come along, Susan," said Star.

"What! are you going to drive with us?" said Susan.

"Yes," answered Star.

Susan got in, looking sulky. Soon the wagonette was filled. Star jumped in last, banged-to the door, and told the driver to start.

They reached their destination, a beautiful ruin about eight miles away, examined it to their hearts' content, had tea in a cottage near, where such things were supplied to visitors, and finally were about to start home, when Star went up to Susan and touched her on the arm.

"Read your note," she said brusquely.

"My note?"

"Don't be silly, Susan; I saw Ellen give it to you. Read it; I want to know the contents."

"What possible affair is it of yours?"

"I mean to make it my affair," said Star. "You had best be quick about it. You know I disobeyed yesterday."

"You did, and a fine row you'll get into. Oh, you immaculate girl, whom Miss Peacock thinks so much of! I can open her eyes."

"I can explain things to Miss Peacock," said Star; "but that is neither here nor there. I am prepared to suffer if I have done wrong. But, Susan, my wrongdoing won't put yours right. You are in a very serious position at this moment, and you had best let me help you."

"Help me?" said Susan. "Do you mean to?"

"I will tell you presently. Read your letter."

"I—I won't."

"Very well. Perhaps you will when I have spoken a little longer. Yesterday evening I went home to tea with Florence Dixie."

"You did? Well, I never!"

"I had tea with her, and she walked back with me part of the way. I asked her to tell me if you had sent her a note. She denied it."

"Of course she did, for I never sent her any note."

"Just wait a while, Susan, before you tell any more lies. Well, she and I were talking together, when those interesting friends of yours, the Mannerses, came up. They immediately spoke to Florence about the note that she had received. I can bring them forward as witnesses if necessary. That's about all for the present. Maud did deliver a note to Florence Dixie, and I can bring witnesses to prove it."

Susan turned very white. "Really, Star," she said, "I can't imagine why I have put up with your interference." But though she said the words in a defiant tone, she was a good deal shaken and very much alarmed. "You surely don't want to make mischief now," she said—"now, when *she* is better."

"Susan," said Star very earnestly, "do you know why I was so awfully wretched last night?"

"Were you wretched? I didn't know it."

"Oh, Susan! I could not sleep; I could not rest. I felt—oh, I can't tell you how I felt! But it was—it was almost like hell, Susan. And do you know what made me most unhappy of all? It was the feeling that if she died, you, Susan Marsh, would be in a way responsible for her death."

"Oh, how dare you say so?"

"Yes, Susan, you would. I am not angry now; I am just awfully miserable when I think about you.

Can't you repent? Can't you be sorry? Can't you thank God for being so good to you? Oh, if—*if* she had died!"

Star's melodious voice, and Star's lovely eyes, and the pathos on the sweet little face were not altogether lost upon Susan Marsh at that moment. Without daring to tell herself so, she too had been in terror the night before; but the difference between her state and Star's was this—that Star was sorry because she had done wrong, while Susan was sorry because she feared punishment.

"Read your note," said Star, suddenly altering her tone and speaking with asperity; and Susan, contrary to her own inclination, took the note out of her pocket and read Emma Manners' words. When she had read the letter she handed it to Star.

"It seems to concern you too, Star," she said. "I suppose it is the best way out. I have to explain to the girls. They have been looking forward to something very special on Wednesday. I must tell them that on account of Christian's illness our special feast has been deferred. You will come, of course."

"I! What do you take me for?"

"But you will, Star; you will have to. There's no other way to keep the thing dark."

"Do you suppose I mean to keep it dark?"

"Star! Star!"

"Do you suppose it for a single moment, Susan?"

Miss Forest's voice was calling to the girls:

"Come, girls; no more loitering. We must get back into our wagonettes and drive home or we shall be overtaken by the dusk."

Star and Susan were obliged to postpone any further conversation, but as Susan was getting into the wagonette she turned to her companion.

"We must fight this thing out," said. "Where, and when?"

"In my room to-night," said Star without a moment's hesitation.

Susan nodded and got into the wagonette. Star was relieved to find that she could get into another of the carriages on her way home. She sat near her special friend Angela Goring.

"Why, Star, you don't look a bit well," said Angela.

"Angel," replied Star, "if you were going through exactly what I am at this present moment you would not look well either."

"You are bothered by that horrid girl."

"I am very nearly as bad myself," said Star.

"You?"

"Yes; I behaved abominably to that poor child. Yesterday I did wrong too."

"Oh! don't talk quite so loud; the others will hear."

"Then let us whisper together, Angel, for I must relieve my mind."

"Well, what is it?"

"In order to discover something about Susan, I disobeyed Miss Peacock. She said none of us were to leave the grounds. She sent a message. I heard the message delivered, and I went right away—right through the garden, and down by the left walk, and out onto the high-road. I was away for some hours, and I even had tea with one of the town girls. Think of that! I got home rather late. Of course no one noticed."

"We were all so anxious last night. But why did you do it? I must say you puzzle me a good deal."

"I did it; and what is more, I am not sorry. What I am sorry about is that I ever took that cruel attitude towards dear Christian."

Angela did not say anything more for a few minutes, but from time to time, as they were driving back through the sweet spring air, she glanced at Star. Star's piquant face was pale; her lashes were lowered; she looked intensely sad. Suddenly Angela bent towards her.

"Can I help you?" she asked. "Is there anything I can do? You know how much I love you."

"And I love you, Angel." She thought for a minute. "I may want a witness to-night," she said suddenly. "I know Jessie won't be too particular. This is a sort of half-holiday, and we may do things we are not allowed to do on ordinary occasions. I have asked Susan Marsh to meet me in my room to-night. Will you be present also?"

"Certainly, if it will help you."

"It may help me. It may be wiser. I'll let Susan know, and she can bring a friend of hers. Of course, she ought to bring Maud Thompson. I'll take care that she does. Now, let's talk of other matters, Angel. At ten o'clock to-night in my bedroom."

Angela squeezed Star's hand. Another girl joined in the conversation, and to hear Star's merry laugh during the remainder of that drive, one could scarcely guess what a weight rested on her heart.

CHAPTER XXIX

ROSE TO THE RESCUE

At an early hour on the following day there was an arrival at Penwerne Manor. An old woman got out of a cab and entered the house. She was accompanied by a pretty-looking little girl. This old woman was met in the hall by Jessie.

"That's right," said Jessie. "I'm so glad you have come. Christian is much better, and I am sure your face and the face of this dear little girl will be the best possible restorative."

The woman gave a very respectful courtesy.

"Mind your manners, Rosy," she said to the small girl, who dropped a courtesy in exact imitation of her relative; and then they went upstairs.

Girls peeped out at them from behind doors not quite tightly shut, and soon it was repeated all over the school that Christian Mitford's old nurse had come to look after her, and that a wonderfully pretty little girl of the name of Rosy had come to help nurse and to cheer Christian up.

Nurse and Rosy had a room all to themselves in the White Corridor, and Christian smiled when she saw old nurse, and allowed Rosy to kiss her once or twice. But she was still too weak to speak much; or indeed, for that matter, to think much.

Rosy was very much admired by all the different girls in the school, and when a day or two had passed, and Christian still made rapid progress towards recovery, Rose was invited downstairs.

"May we have that dear little girl to play with us?" asked Star, going into Miss Peacock's room.

"Yes, dear; certainly. Rose is an old friend of Christian's, and seems quite a nice child. I believe her great-aunt wants to have her trained as a lady's-maid. Of course, I know nothing about her, except that she belongs to that particularly nice, intelligent old woman."

"Well, a little talk with her will do us no harm," said Star; "and perhaps," she added, "it will do Rose no harm either. She is quite as good as some of the girls in this school, and very much prettier."

"By the way, Star," continued the head-mistress, "in the great relief that Christian's recovery has caused, I have not forgotten certain things that have taken place in this school. There are one or two matters which need inquiry into. Your cheeks, my dear, are a great deal paler than they ought to be; and your eyes, which used to be so happy that it was a perfect pleasure to look at them, are now more sad than I like to see them. In short, there are matters which need to be inquired into and cleared up."

"Oh, there are—indeed there are!" interrupted Star, and she burst into tears.

"My dear Stella, have you made up your mind to confide in me or not?"

"I don't want to be hard on the others; and then I've not been a bit good myself," said Star. "If I could tell you everything without making the others dreadfully wretched, I would; but please don't question me."

"The time for questions is past, Star. I just gave you that one last chance. I mean now to act on my own initiative."

Star left the room. She stood for a minute outside in the great hall. This was a half-holiday, and it happened to be a pouring wet day. The rain seemed absolutely to stream from the skies; you could scarcely see out of the window-panes. The booming of the billows outside made a melancholy sound. The girls stood about in groups, as was their custom during a wet half-holiday. They grumbled at the weather. Who does not?

Suddenly, however, the appearance of little Rose Latimer coming rather timidly downstairs, wearing a dark-blue frock and a white pinafore, caused a diversion.

"Who is that pretty little girl?" said Angela Goring.

Star, who had been standing looking as dismal as a girl could, now brightened up.

"Oh, that is little Rosy Latimer, a great friend of Christian's. Do let us ask her to come and sit with us for a bit. She seems so nice, and is so pretty."

"I don't know her," said Angela. "You go and speak to her, Star."

A lot of girls were standing about in the hall. Amongst them were Susan Marsh and her satellite, Maud Thompson. Maud now hardly ever left Susan's side. Susan's face was gloomy, and at the same time obstinate. She looked resolved to go on at any cost, following her own sweet will. Maud was thoroughly subdued and wretched. The advent of Rose—a person with fresh interests—on the scene therefore caused an agreeable diversion.

Rose was quite ignorant of the manners of schools and the ways of schoolgirls—at least those of the upper classes were unknown to her—but she was being rigidly brought up by a most aristocratic old woman, for no one could have more aristocratic ideas than nurse. She dropped her courtesy, therefore, as she had been told to do, and smiled with great pleasure when Star invited her to come into their midst.

"I am very much obliged, miss," said Rose, and then she dropped another courtesy.

"You needn't courtesy, Rose," said Star. "It's a wet day, and we are all glad to have some sort of diversion. Please, sit there, won't you?—there, in that easy-chair near the ingle-nook—and tell us all you can about Christian."

"What is your name, child?" interrupted Susan Marsh.

Rose looked full at Susan, and then knit her pretty brows.

"I am Rosy Latimer," she said. "And my great-aunt is Mrs. Peach; and Mrs. Peach is, or was nurse to Miss Christian."

"How is Christian, Rose? Is she really getting much better?" asked Star.

"Yes, miss; I think so. She takes her meals, and she sleeps regular; and my aunt says a sick person can't be expected to do more."

"You must have been very glad indeed when you were asked to come here in such a hurry—weren't you?" asked Maud Thompson. "We were surprised when we heard that Christian's old nurse and a little girl were coming to look after her. We thought Christian must be very ill indeed. You were glad, weren't you?"

"Well, miss," said Rose, who, notwithstanding her good manners, was by no means troubled with shyness, "my aunt and me, we were more frightened than glad. We didn't know whatever could be up. And aunt, she cried most of the way down. She cried very near as much as she did that time when me and Miss Christian ran away together."

"Oh, you ran away together!" said Angela.

Star suddenly laid her hand on Angela's knee as though to repress her. Susan's face turned crimson and then deadly white. Rose, however, did not notice the effect of her words.

"Ah, we had a time!" she said, and her eyes grew full of the recollection. Suddenly she burst into a laugh.

"What is the matter?" said Star. "How strange you look! Why do you laugh?"

"I am only thinking of Miss Christian and me, and the face of the woman who looked in at the window. Oh, weren't Miss Christian brave!"

One or two of the other girls had come up, and they were now looking intently at Rose. Star, whose first impulse it was to prevent Rose from saying anything, to keep her silent at any cost, changed her mind.

"One moment," she said.

She sprang to her feet. Rose immediately sprang to hers and dropped a courtesy.

"Thank you, young ladies," said Rose, "but maybe I ought to be going up to my great-aunt, Mrs. Peach. She says I'm never to forget my manners. I'm never to forget that I'm only a poor little girl, and that you are grand young ladies."

"I am sure you are a very nice little girl," said Angela; "and a very interesting little girl, too. Star, is she to go? What do you think?"

"I want to see Miss Peacock," said Star. "Stay here, Rose, till I come back. And, Rose, don't tell any of that interesting, lovely story until I return."

Star ran along the corridor. She stood for a moment as she approached Miss Peacock's door.

"They wouldn't tell what they knew, and they wouldn't let Christian tell, and perhaps Rose is going to put everything right," she thought. "And she could give us a really unvarnished statement. She could tell us the very, very truth."

She burst open the door of Miss Peacock's room. She did not even wait to knock. Miss Peacock was sitting at her desk. She turned in some amazement when

Star, her eyes shining with excitement, came towards her.

"Miss Peacock," said the little girl, "you know, don't you, why Christian didn't come to school with the rest of us? I mean, why she came a whole fornight later."

"I don't understand you, Star."

"Oh, please don't be angry! You know the whole truth, don't you?"

"Certainly."

"And you resolved that it should not be told to the school?"

"I thought it best. I do not understand you."

"It wasn't best," said Star. "It is wrong of me to say so to you, but I must say it. It was not best. Do you know the little girl who has come with Christian's nurse to stay here?"

"A child of the name of Rose Latimer. She is a great friend of Christian's; I sent for her on purpose. Why?"

"Miss Peacock, you gave us leave to have little Rose to play with us. She is in the midst of a group of girls now in the great hall, and she began of her own accord to tell that story that you didn't wish Christian to tell. May she go on with it, and will you come and listen?"

Miss Peacock jumped up suddenly. She looked hard at Star just for a minute; then she took her hand.

"Come," she said.

They entered the hall. At the sight of the head-mistress the girls arose and dropped a courtesy, and looked more or less unlike themselves, and more or less on their good behavior. Even Angela, one of the best of girls, remained standing in a respectful attitude, and had she been asked to speak, her words would not have come with perfect ease.

But to Rose Miss Peacock was only just a beautiful lady without any other significance whatever. Rose dropped a courtesy, in the correct manner taught her by Mrs. Peach, and looked quite easy in her mind. Miss Peacock said:

"Will someone place me a chair?"

One of the girls rushed to get one. Then Miss Peacock sat in the midst of the group, with Star at her left hand and Angela at her right, and she managed so to sit that she should be opposite Susan Marsh. Then she turned to Rose.

"We are in the mood for a story," she said. "We have all told each other our stories, and our stories are somewhat stale. They relate to school life and school adventures. Now we want a story outside of school life. Who will tell us one?"

"I could if you wished it," said Rose.

"We do wish it, Rose. Will you?"

"It is Miss Christian's story," continued Rose.

"Go upstairs, Rose—very, very quietly—and ask Christian—very, very quietly—if you may tell her story to us. If she says no, you will not tell it us; but if she says yes, then you will tell us the wonderful tale."

"Oh! it is wonderful and beautiful and everything else," said Rose. "Yes, I will go upstairs."

She ran quickly up the broad stairs, went down the White Corridor, and softly opened the door of the room where nurse sat by her darling's bedside. Christian, well enough now to be wide awake and smiling, was listening to words from the old woman's lips.

"Now, what is it, Rosy?" said Mrs. Peach. "What's the matter with you? You do seemed pleased about something."

"It's a message I have to give to Miss Christian," said Rose; "and it's from the lady they call Miss Peacock."

"My word!" cried nurse. "Why, she's the lady of the school; she's the head-mistress. She's a sort of queen here."

"What is the message?" asked Christian.

"It's nothing as is to bother Miss Christian," said nurse. "There! you have made her cheeks quite pink. What is it, Rose? Out with it."

"They want a story," said Rose. "There are a lot of 'em downstairs. Some of 'em are beautiful-looking young ladies, and others dull and stupid enough. There's one I didn't like a bit. I wouldn't know her if I had to live in the slums all my life. They all want a story just like any other girls. They know their own stories, they say, and they want a new one from me; and I thought I'd tell 'em the story of me and you, Miss Christian. And Miss Peacock, the grand head-mistress, the queen of the place, said:

"'Yes, you can tell that story if Christian wishes it. If Christian says yes, you may tell it; but if Christian says no, you must not tell it. You go up,' says Miss Peacock, 'and ask her now, and do it very quietly.'

"So do you wish it, Miss Christian? Shall I tell the story? It 'll hearten 'em up a good bit; it's real prime, that tale is."

"Yes," answered Christian. She turned away as she said the words, but there was a smile in her eyes. "Yes, it will be the way out, and a great, great relief. Tell them, Rose, and God bless you!"

Rose rushed from the room, and the next minute appeared again in the hall.

"Miss Christian looked sadly weak, but she'd like me to tell the tale. She thinks it a very, very good plan," said Rose.

"Then sit here, Rose," said Miss Peacock. "Sit just here, facing me, and tell your story exactly in your own way, just in the words you like best to use. I am sure we shall all listen with great attention."

"If you please, Miss Peacock," said Susan Marsh, "need I stay? I have a letter to write to my father; and my exercise for Miss Forest is not half finished."

"Yes, you must stay, Susan," replied Miss Peacock.

"But my exercise——"

"Never mind that now. Stay. Begin, please, Rose."

"That's the girl I wouldn't know if I had to live in the slums," thought Rose to herself.

She turned her right shoulder towards Susan, and spoke with her face direct towards Miss Peacock.

"It's a wonderful, wonderful story," she began; "and maybe there's a spice of naughtiness in it—I don't say there aint. But there's something else in it too, and that's a deal of courage. And when it come home to the heart of Miss Christian to know that it was wrong, no one repented more sincere than she did. And here's the tale; and she wishes me to tell it her own dear self."

So Rosy began, and not knowing all the events that had taken place in the school, nor the circumstances that made that story so great a tragedy, she told it with a certain directness that made it extremely effective. She told it very simply, too, so that the youngest and smallest girl present could understand every word. As for the story itself, it was very thrilling, beginning with Christian's experience and the old attic in the Russell Square house, going on to the confab that the two girls had when they lay side by side in Christian's snug bed, and proceeding right up to the time when the two terrified children pushed the old bedstead against the door that could not be locked. That crucial and awful moment when Mrs. Carter tried to get in at the window, and Christian boldly kept her back, was described with such vivid realism by Rosy that one or two of the young listeners screamed. Rosy also gave with much effect a description of the scene when the children found themselves in the carpenter's yard. Their terror, their despair when Christian discovered that her little bag of money was gone, brought down the house, so to speak. Rosy herself did ample justice to the theme. She was quite dramatic in her actions. At times she could not keep still, but jumped to her feet and pointed out imaginary people with her fingers. Sometimes tears rolled down her own cheeks, and sighs and almost sobs broke the narrative. But when she spoke of the carpenter and his mother, the tea the old woman gave the tired and sad young girls, and the kindness of the carpenter when he walked with them all the way to Russell Square, Miss Peacock and her pupils were so much affected that they longed to start a subscription on the spot for the worthy pair.

At last the whole story was told, even to that part when Miss Thompson and nurse rejoiced and Christian was safe back again in the old home.

As Miss Peacock listened, she wondered much why she had never before thought of bringing Rose on the scene and making her tell the story.

"Thank you, Rose Latimer," she said when a dead silence followed all the excitement. "You have told your tale beautifully; and although it is a tale of wrongdoing, there are fine points in it, and those who truly repent will always be forgiven by God. Now, will you kindly go upstairs to Mrs. Peach? Don't disturb Christian if she is asleep; but if she is awake, say to her that we all send to her our dear love. Am I right in giving that message, girls? We all, knowing the worst, send our dear love to Christian Mitford."

"Certainly—we send our dearest love," answered two or three.

Even Maud Thompson had given a message. Susan alone was silent.

"She aint worthy to be even a slum girl," thought Rosy to herself.

"Yes, ma'am," she continued—and she dropped a most beautiful courtesy, one that even Mrs. Peach would have approved of—"I will take your message, ma'am. And I'm much obliged to all you young ladies. It has given me a great deal of pleasure to tell the story of my darling Miss Christian and myself." Then Rose trotted upstairs.

She entered Christian's room. Christian had little spots of color on each cheek, and her eyes were perhaps a trifle too bright.

"They all took to it most kindly, Miss Christian," said innocent Rose. "I told them everything from beginning to end, and I think I done it well; and Miss Peacock said I was to tell you that they *all* sent you their dearest love. But there's one girl down there that I can't abide anyhow. I don't think she sent any message, for I don't believe for a single moment she knows even the meaning of love. But the others did. They're precious fond of you, Miss Christian. I doubt if it was worth running away from a school of this sort."

"Oh, it was not, Rosy! Oh, Rosy, I am *so* relieved! They know it all—everything?"

"Every single crumb of it, Miss Christian, darling; and I did enjoy myself in the telling it."

CHAPTER XXX

A PRISONER IN THE TOOL-HOUSE

WHEN the story was over and the narrator had gone away, Miss Peacock also rose. She stood and faced the girls.

"There are here," she said, "about twenty in all. The school contains forty girls, reckoning Christian herself. Christian cannot appear, but I should like the remaining nineteen to come to me. Star Lestrange, my dear, will you fetch the entire school into the hall?"

Star rushed off. Once again Susan looked as though she wished to escape, but to do so she would have had to pass Miss Peacock, and she knew, therefore, that her effort would be useless.

Star was not long in collecting the school, and when they trooped in Miss Peacock remarked:

"Stand round me, my dears; I have something to say."

They collected in a group. Miss Peacock stood at one side of a wide circle.

"My dear girls, you all know how ill Christian Mitford has been. You know that from the brink of the grave she has been restored to us. Had she died, I can scarcely tell you what a fearful blow would have fallen upon us all. Not only should we have lost a dear pupil and a brave, delightful schoolfellow, but there are circumstances attending her illness which would have made her death a very terrible matter to us all; for I wish to tell you now, girls, that there are some in this school who have not acted kindly to Christian Mitford. Her illness has been largely caused by trouble of mind. She came here expecting sisterly affection, but from the very first she was treated with suspicion. There are some—I mention no names as yet—who behaved with cruelty to Christian. Had she died, those girls could scarcely know a happy moment again. My dear pupils, it has doubtless been whispered amongst you that Christian Mitford came to this school surrounded by a little mystery. That is perfectly true. Something happened just before she came to school which delayed her coming for a fortnight. Full particulars of the occurrence were sent to me, and I thought—unwisely, as it turns out—that it would be best not to acquaint the school with what, it appeared to me, did not concern it. As things happened, I was wrong. There are girls now standing before me who discovered this mystery—I do not know how—and who made a handle of it; who blackmailed Christian, a girl who had never before been at school, and made her thoroughly wretched. What they did I am not prepared to say, for a great deal has been concealed from me. But I wish to declare to you all who are now present that the mystery is cleared up. Twenty of you have heard Christian's story, and each of you twenty girls is permitted to tell that story to the girls who were not present to hear Rose Latimer's narrative. I shall have more to say by and by. For the present my wish is that every girl in Penwerne Manor should know the true reason why Christian Mitford was a fortnight late in coming to school."

Miss Peacock hastily made her way through the group of girls. As she passed Susan Marsh she stopped and looked at her.

" You can now prepare your exercise," she said, " and do as you think fit. I think your wings are clipped," she added. "I shall have more to say by and by."

Never before had Miss Peacock looked so dignified, and never before had she said such bitter words as those now addressed to Susan Marsh. She left the room and went straight to her private sitting room. There she rang her bell, and told the servant to ask Miss Jessie Jones to come to her at once.

Jessie appeared within a few minutes. Jessie had not been present in the hall when Rose Latimer told Christian's story. The minute she entered the room, however, she saw by Lavinia Peacock's face that something had happened.

"Now, Jessie," she said, "you and I have got to clear the horizon. Next we have got to rid the school of a most pernicious influence. We have got to get to the very bottom of a base conspiracy. My dear friend, this is not the hour for soft measures or kindness; this is the hour when true kindness must be severe. My school would cease to be the Penwerne Manor I like to think of if certain girls who have acted in a most disgraceful manner are not suitably punished."

"Oh, Lavinia! I see you are very angry, and I don't really understand," said Jessie. "Of course, it is fearfully hard about our poor dear Christian; but she is better now. God has saved her life."

"But if she had died, should you or I ever have held up our heads again? No, my dear. I will tell you what has happened. You know little Rose Latimer?"

"Yes; Mrs. Peach's little grand-niece—a bright, nice little girl."

"Little Rose, quite innocently, began to tell the story of Christian's adventure before she came to us to several of the girls assembled in the hall."

"But oh! you didn't let her——"

"Let me speak. Star Lestrange—I am really fond of dear Star—came to me at once and asked if I would be present. I went into the hall. To little Rose I am just an ordinary lady; she was not shy of me. I sent her up to ask Christian's permission. The story was told. It has now been spread throughout the entire school. Some of the girls are very miserable; one girl is very angry. Jessie, I take shame to myself for not having allowed the child's adventure to be known from the very first. But now, dear, I must, as I said, take measures. Sit down, Jessie, and tell me the exact truth with regard to the secret society in the midst of the school called the Penwernians."

Jessie's face turned very pink; tears filled her eyes.

"Come, Jessie; I must know everything. I gave you liberty in the past; I give you none now. Tell me everything."

What little Jessie told she did not know, nor how she told it, nor exactly what she said; but Miss Peacock listened calmly. After a time, going close to the little speaker, she held her hand. When this happened Jessie felt that she could tell better than ever. Courage came into her; she became certain that Miss Peacock was right. She had always adored Lavinia Peacock; now she knew that harshness in the real sense of the word could never come from those kind lips, nor proceed from that true and generous heart. At last Jessie stopped.

"I did wrong," said Miss Peacock when all was finished. "I love you, Jessie; you are the greatest comfort I have, but a mistress in my position ought to know everything. In the future, dear, we will have just as happy a time—nay, a happier time—at Penwerne Manor, but we can never allow things to come to such a pass that an innocent girl can be willfully tortured by her companions."

"And what about to-night?" said Jessie.

"At what hour is the feast generally held?"

"They go to bed, you know, Lavina, apparently just as usual, and then they slip away from their rooms. Oh, you needn't think, dear, that I go to bed on those nights. Not I! I wait about, just hovering near, to be certain that there is no real mischief; and when they are snug in their beds, then I retire."

"You, dear little, patient Jessie! You have tried to act the guardian angel; but the post is too much for you, dear. To-night I, Lavinia Peacock, will take your place."

"Oh, Lavinia, they would be so frightened—so terrified—if they saw you!"

"It is your impression that there is going to be a very special feast to-night?"

"I did think so, but I am not so sure now. Some provisions were got in, but for the last two or three days all has been quiet."

"Well, dear, to-night I will mount guard. Say nothing to anyone."

Jessie soon afterwards left Miss Peacock's presence. She felt so upset, so terrified, at what she considered her betrayal of her darling girl that she had to retire to her own room, and did not even appear at tea time. The girls, however, were all too excited to notice her absence. Christian was the heroine of the hour.

Next to Christian, Rose took the highest place. Wasn't she pretty? And wasn't she stanch and true and faithful? And wasn't the adventure itself quite a grand sort of affair? And wasn't Christian really brave?

"To think that I should ever have doubted her bravery!" thought Star.

As Star thought in a very penitent way of her own conduct in the past, a hand was put on her arm, and looking up, she saw Maud Thompson by her side.

" Star, I do wish you'd come and speak to her. She's in the bowling-alley, and she's crying just like anything. She wouldn't come in to tea. She says she hates everyone in the place."

" Do you mean Susan? " asked Star.

"Yes—oh, yes! Do come to her! I think she respects you if she respects anyone."

Star thought for a minute. The rain was still pouring. To get to the bowling-alley she had to run down a sidewalk which was dripping with moisture. Turning her skirt over her head, she ran quickly, followed by Maud. Susan was standing where an eave from a neighboring tool-house slightly protected her. Her handkerchief was pressed to her eyes; she was bending forward. As Star drew near she heard her very audible sobs.

" Are you sorry, Susan? " said Star.

" I sorry? No. Go away; don't torture me."

" Oh, Susan! I said I would bring her, and you said you'd listen to her. Here's the key of the tool-house. Let's open it and go in. We must say something to comfort you, Susan. I am an awfully bad girl, but I am sorry for you."

" No one is sorry for me," said Susan.

" Oh, yes, someone is. I am, and so is Star."

" If she is going to repent, I'll try and be sorry," said Star. " Are you going to repent, Susan? "

" No, I can't—I won't. There's nothing to be done. I must go to those girls to-night, and you must come with me. I am crying so because everyone has forsaken me, for Maud doesn't wish to come."

" Of course you are not going, Maud," said Star. " You will just stay with me; yes, you will."

"No, no; I won't forsake her," said Maud. "Everyone else has. I told you, Susy, that if you went I would go with you; but I wish you'd give it up. We are certain to be discovered."

"I suppose we are," said Susan, suddenly stopping her tears and looking full at Star. "I suppose you have told. I always knew you would."

"I have not told yet."

"Then, you mean to tell?"

"Yes, I mean to tell."

"You are certain?"

"Yes, I am; I do mean to tell."

"When?"

"Before you go out at midnight and disgrace us all. I shall certainly tell."

"Then you won't, so there!" said Susan.

She suddenly pushed Star forward. There was a step, down which the little girl tumbled. Before she could recover herself she was firmly locked into the tool-house, and Susan and Maud were running back to the house.

"It was awfully mean of you," began Maud. "I didn't think, bad as you are, that you'd do it."

"Yes, I did it. You have promised to come with me. She is locked safely in now. She may scream as loud as she can and not a soul will hear her there. I will let her out again if I come back. Perhaps I'll never come back. Perhaps I'll stay with Florence Dixie. I could write from there to my father. I couldn't get into greater disgrace."

"Then if you stay I'll stay too," said Maud. "But, oh, Susan, I do think you are wicked!"

"Never mind now; come upstairs. Let us keep out of the way of all the others. We'll have one last fling—one last bit of fun."

A few of the Penwernians were scattered about. One of them came up and spoke to Susan.

"Do you know where Star is? I want her."

"I am not her keeper," said Susan roughly.

"But what about our feast to-night? Are we to have it?"

"I was going to speak about that," said Susan, recollecting herself. "As that precious Christian Mitford, about whom everyone is making such a ridiculous fuss, is still very ill, we had best not risk matters. The feast is therefore postponed for another week."

"I am glad," said the girl. "I begin to hate the Penwernians."

Susan walked away.

"Now then, Maud, buck up and be cheerful once again. We will account for Star's absence, and you and I will have a jolly time."

CHAPTER XXXI

MIDNIGHT AT THE GREENGROCER'S

The rest of the day passed quietly. Miss Peacock, contrary to her usual custom, appeared at late supper that evening. She took the head of the longest table, and looked from one girl to another. She noticed that some were missing, amongst them Susan Marsh, Maud Thompson, and Star Lestrange. She was not surprised at the absence of the first two, but the absence of the younger girl caused her heart to sink even lower than it already was in her breast.

The meal proceeded and came to an end; prayers followed, and then the greater number of the girls dispersed for the night.

It was about an hour later when Miss Peacock, accompanied by Jessie Jones, went upstairs. They entered the White Corridor very softly. The door of Christian's room was a little ajar, and Miss Peacock was afraid of waking her. By and by she came to the foot of the stairs. All was quiet.

"I am sure they are not there to-night. I am sure we needn't go any farther," whispered Jessie.

"I think we will go upstairs to make all safe," was Miss Peacock's answer.

So Jessie, who knew the trick of the door, pushed it open, and without anyone seeing, they went up the creaking stairs and entered the wide front attic. Here all looked peaceful and orderly. Miss Jessie gave a sigh of relief.

"Now, Jessie," said Miss Peacock, "will you go downstairs? First of all, go straight to Star Lestrange's room and ascertain if she is safe in bed; then proceed to Maud Thompson's room and do likewise; and, finally, visit Susan Marsh's bedroom. Be quick, dear; and if by any chance you find that those three beds, or any of them, are vacant, go to my room and fetch me my cloak and galoshes. Be as quick as you can."

"Yes," said Miss Jessie.

She nodded her head. She felt terribly anxious. She even felt a fierce desire, unlike herself, to follow the trail, to bring the culprits to justice. Yes, if they were wicked enough to do what Miss Peacock feared they had done, they ought to be punished. Things must have come to a sad pass when Jessie could feel like this, but those certainly were her sensations. Lavinia was angry—dear, noble Lavinia. Whatever she said and did must be right.

While Jessie was absent Miss Peacock walked round the attic. In one corner she saw a basket filled with provisions. They none of them looked too fresh, but they were certainly there. Near the open window lay a piece of paper. Miss Peacock picked it up, and saw that it was an untidy-looking envelope, with "John Manners, greengrocer, High Street, Tregellick," printed across the top. Why should this envelope lie on the floor of the front attic? She put it carefully into her pocket. Then thrusting her head out of the window, she saw a ladder, which reached from the ground beneath to within a few feet of the window. Miss Peacock panted slightly when she saw this; her eyes grew bright and hard, and her face looked unlike itself.

Just at that moment Jessie entered. She was carrying Miss Peacock's warm cloak on her arm, and Miss Peacock's galoshes were in her hand. She herself wore a bonnet and cloak.

"They're none of them in their beds," she said. "I don't know what we are to do."

"We will follow them," said Miss Peacock.

"Follow them? How?"

"They have left the attic by means of a ladder. Look out, Jessie; you will see for yourself. It is not necessary for us to use it; we will go by the front door. Jessie, think how severely Lavinia Peacock ought to blame herself for making this thing possible."

"No, no, Lavinia; it is my fault. You will turn me from the school after this."

"I blame myself alone," said Miss Peacock.

The ladies left the attic, ran downstairs, and let themselves out.

"They have certainly gone; but where?" said Jessie.

"I found one of our greengrocer's envelopes on the floor. It may give me a necessary clew," said Miss Peacock. "Anyhow, we will visit John Manners this evening. Come along, Jessie. We shall reach the house in a quarter of an hour."

"How the rain did pour! How tired Jessie felt! How fast Lavinia walked! How stern was her face when Jessie caught a glimpse of it!

By and by they reached the High Street. The place appeared at first to be in total darkness, but presently they perceived a cheerful light streaming through closed blinds.

"I was right; they are here," said Miss Peacock. "Oh, Jessie! to think of Star—to think that she could have done it. It cuts me to the heart."

Poor Jessie had not a word to say. She adored Star. but even she could not defend her favorite at this moment.

Miss Peacock suddenly pulled the bell. Presently

Manners appeared. He had been smoking in his kitchen. He thought it great fun to have the young ladies enjoying themselves with his daughters upstairs. But when he saw Miss Peacock he stepped back and grew very pale. He had certainly not reckoned on the head-mistress of the school appearing in person to demand her runaway scholars.

"Some of my young ladies are in your parlor," said Miss Peacock. "I am obliged to you, Manners, for treating them so hospitably, but the hour is too late for my girls to be from home. I have come to take them back. With your permission I will go upstairs at once."

"Shall I announce you, ma'am?"

"You will oblige me by remaining where you are. Come, Jessie."

They pushed the little greengrocer aside and went upstairs. The fun was at its height. Miss Peacock softly opened the door. She saw Florence Dixie holding her sides in convulsions of laughter, while Susan, lying back on an old Chesterfield sofa, was clapping her hands at the attempts of the two Manners girls to dance an Irish jig.

To attempt to describe the confusion, the amazement—nay, the despair—which filled the faces of two of those girls when they caught sight of Miss Peacock would be impossible. Maud gave a bitter cry and fell on her knees. A cloud came over Susan's face; she stood upright, her hands hanging to her side.

"The fun is up, girls," she said, turning to her companions. "Let's put out the lights and go home."

Making hysterical efforts, she tried to blow out one of the candles; but Miss Peacock came up and took her hand.

"Come, Susan; recollect yourself. Don't give yourself away more than you can help. Come home with me this moment."

"Florence, you said you'd keep me," said Susan.

"Oh, but I can't, really!" said Florence, who showed the despicable character of the true coward when difficulties arose. "Father would be wild if he knew. Please, Miss Peacock, understand that father knows nothing of this. It was just a little fun of our own. I wouldn't shelter one of your girls against your will for the world."

"Oh, you're a nice friend," said Susan—"a friend to be proud of!"

"I'll take you home, Susan. And, Maud, you can follow with Jessie."

Miss Peacock's face was calm and cold; her words came out like morsels of ice. She went downstairs at once. Susan put her hat on as fast as she could, and Miss Peacock herself stooped to tie her cloak round her neck. Then they started on their way home. Maud and Jessie, absolutely speechless, followed them. Once Maud tried to say something, but she was interrupted.

"Don't, don't! It is best to let her have her own way now. Oh! you have cut her to the heart, and she is such a dear—so noble."

The moment they reached the hall Miss Peacock said:

"There are three girls absent from their bedrooms to-night. Two of them are here, but where is Stella Lestrange?"

Then Maud fell on her knees.

"I don't expect you to forgive us. We——"

"Don't screen me," said Susan. "If I am bad, I am at least not ashamed of it. I was determined to have that frolic. I hate your close ways. I hate everything about this school. I want to leave to-morrow; I can't go away too soon. But I was determined to have my frolic to-night. Star was equally determined that we should not go, so I locked her up in the tool-house. Maud was forced to help me, but she didn't approve. You needn't scold Maud. When she is with good girls she will be all right; and I shall leave in the morning."

"Where did you say you locked Star up?" said Miss Peacock.

"In the tool-house."

"Thank you."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE TRIUMPH OF GOODNESS

Early—very early—on the following morning, those girls who happened to be awake might have heard sounds of wheels on the gravel sweep without the house. They might have heard hurried steps going down the corridor; and had they chosen to rise from their beds and look out of the windows, they would have perceived a lady and a girl get into a cab. They would have seen some boxes being put on the roof, and the cab, with the lady and girl inside, leaving the place.

When school did resume its ordinary functions on that unhappy day Miss Forest read prayers; and when prayers were over she said quite simply:

"Miss Peacock will not attend school to-day; and Susan Marsh has left. Matters will be explained to you to-morrow."

So the day dragged on. Star's face was very white; her head ached. She had taken a bad cold in the tool-house.

As to Maud, she shrank into a corner.

"Of course, I shall be dismissed. I can't expect Miss Peacock to keep me any longer," was her thought.

Late that evening Miss Peacock returned; and on the next morning, when prayers were over, she asked the girls to remain.

"I have a few words to say," she remarked. "I have a very painful matter to explain to you all. Girls, one of your schoolfellows has, I grieve to say, been removed from the school. I am most unhappy about her, but in justice to you all I could not allow her to remain here any longer. Not only did she sin against the rules of rectitude and honor and honesty in this place; not only did she willfully disobey my wishes; but she did not repent. I do not think, girls, that there is any sin a schoolgirl could commit that I should not forgive if repentance followed. But this unhappy girl has not repented. I was obliged to take her back to her father, and a terrible and most bitter scene we had together. What he will do with Susan in the future I do not know; but as far as Penwerne Manor is concerned, she has left it forever."

A cry came from the lips of Mary Hillary.

"Her companions," continued Miss Peacock, looking full at Maud and also at Mary, "will understand that underhand ways are to be altogether abolished in the school; and because the Penwernian Society has led to evil and not good, I wish to announce here that there will no longer be such a society in the school. As to you, Maud Thompson, have you anything to say? If so, come forward. You at least, I know, have repented."

"Oh, I have! I am bitterly sorry. I know that you won't keep me. I can't expect it. I was led by Susan. I feared her; I was so weak. I loved Star all the time, but I didn't dare to go with her, for I dreaded Susan Marsh so much. I was deceitful; I did what Susan told me. I have nothing more to say, except that I am bitterly sorry. I suppose," added Maud, the tears streaming from her eyes, "that you will send me from the school."

"What is the wish of the majority?" asked Miss Peacock, glancing round at the other girls.

"Oh, Miss Peacock," said Louisa Twining, "if she is sorry——"

"Yes, Louisa?"

"If she is sorry," repeated Louisa, "and would consent for a little bit to be my friend—I mean, if she would sit in my boudoir, and I might get her to share some of the interests in my life—would you?"

Louisa's delicate face changed from white to pink, and then from pink to white again.

"Would I what, Louisa dear?"

"Would you give her a chance?"

"Louisa!" said Maud.

She ran up to her side. She fell on her knees, clasped Louisa's long, white hand, and kissed it with passion.

"Will you be responsible for her, Louisa?"

"Maud, look at me," said Louisa.

Maud did look up.

"I think I may safely say that I will."

"Then she shall be your child for the remainder of this term. You will teach her what things are right, what things are honorable, what things are of good repute. And now, girls, let us turn from an unpleasant subject. It is necessary sometimes to weed what is really bad out of life, out of school. I would have kept Susan Marsh had it been possible. As it was impossible, those who believe in prayer will, I hope, pray for her that God may show her the error of her ways. She has gone, and with her the misery, the discomfort, the prying, the unkindness, which such conduct as hers could not but promote. Christian Mitford is out of danger, and I hope that ere long she will be among you again. She has been far from good; but who is perfect? If she did wrong, Star, there were moments when you might have been more generous, kinder, less inclined to think well of yourself. Each of you girls who stand before me must own to weaknesses as well as to virtues. I think, my dear girls, that the virtues do preponderate; and I think in the future there will be no school in the whole of England that will be a happier one than Penwerne Manor."

THE END

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